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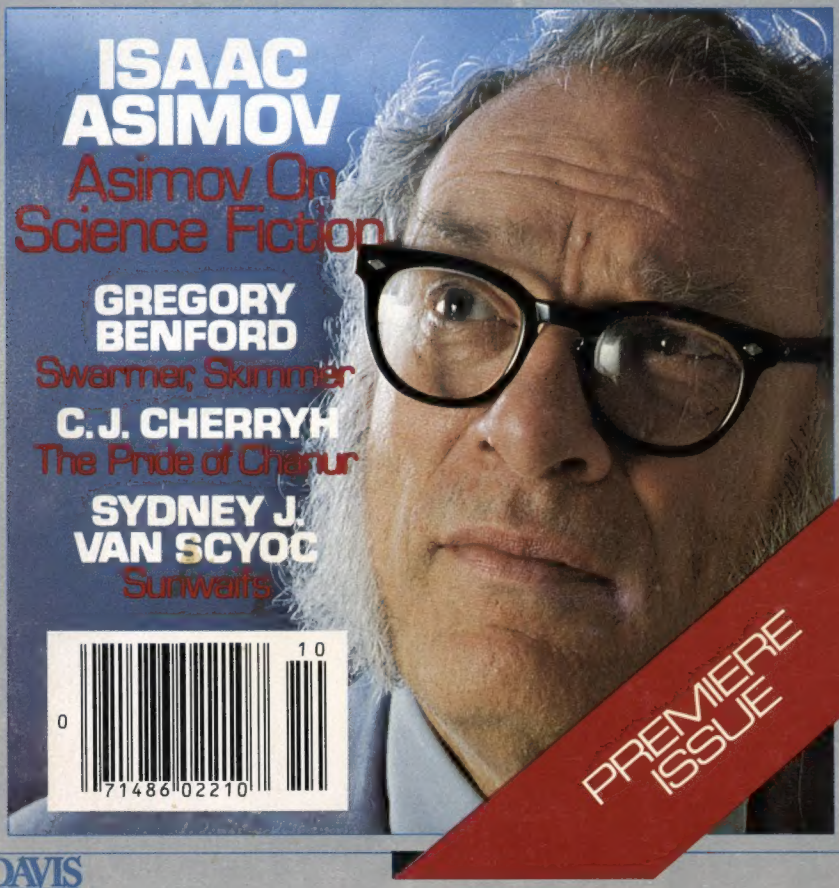

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Asimov On Science Fiction

**GREGORY BENFORD**
Swarmer, Skimmer

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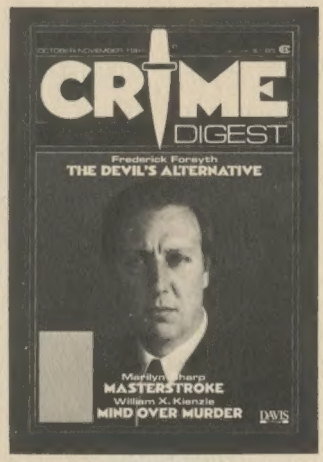


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*Professor of Physics at the University of California at Irvine, Gregory Benford has numerous short stories and several novels to his credit, the most recent of which, Timescape, won the Hugo Award for Best Novel of 1980.*

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# EDITORIAL

☐ What on earth is *Science Fiction Digest*, you may have wondered as you picked up this magazine. So you turned to the editorial, hoping for a clue. And, as you suspected, that's what this premier editorial is all about.

First of all, let me tell you what we're not: We're not the Cliff's Notes or the Classic Comics of the science fiction field. What we hope to be is a guide to the overwhelmed reader. With nearly 1200 titles published as science fiction books last year, we know how daunting the racks in your local bookstore can seem. And 1200 is only the number of books that were acknowledged as SF by their publishers. As we all know, there are lots of other books out there, published as "occult fiction," "horror fiction," "fantasy," and even "mainstream" that fit easily into the SF aficionado's definition of the field. So how's a bewildered reader to choose? Well, that's why we're here. We can keep track of exciting young writers, new books by old favorites, "hot" new titles, and innovative new fiction. And we can read it all (well, a lot of it, anyway), and choose the best to present to you in condensed form in these pages.

Ahah! you may have just said to yourself. Just what do they mean by "condensed?" Will I be getting the author's own words, or a mangled version rewritten to fit into an allotted space? Fear not. Of course you'll be getting the author's own words. *We will not do any rewriting.* What you'll be getting here are excerpts, so cleverly hewn from the complete books that they read as smoothly and engrossingly as the originals. And while the condensations will not leave you hanging by your fingernails on a cliff's edge, we hope they'll interest you enough that you will be moved to go out and buy the entire book when it appears. At the very least, they'll give you an introduction to a particular author's work, and may lead you to search out his or her books in the future.

So, that's what *Science Fiction Digest* is. We're not going to stick to anyone's "textbook" definition of "science fiction." We're going to pick the best from all possible worlds and present it to you in accessible—and affordable—fashion.

Well, we don't want to keep you from the rest of the issue any longer. Read, enjoy, and keep in touch.

Shawna McCarthy

# SPECULATIONS

□For those of you who aren't in the know, in the publisher's cockeyed timetable, September marks the start of the new year. Backtoschool specials are distributed, along with calendars, a preponderance of the year's best hardcovers, the most competitive (and inflationary) bids for paperback bestsellerdom, and a goodly sample of the 1200 science fiction books and 2257 science books published annually. September is ratings month along Publisher's Row.

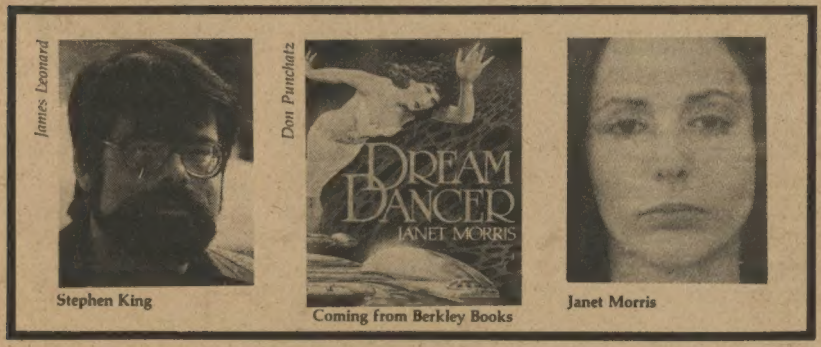
To the average consumer, this means comparatively little. Of course, keeping up with the current crop of novels becomes at first difficult and eventually impossible as supply seasonably exceeds demand. Still, almost every publisher has slated one or more notable books for September. One of the 'sleepers' of the season is **Stephen King's** THE MIST, a novella-length selection from **Kirby McCauley's** extraordinary authology DARK FORCES, due from Bantam. Most of King's millions of readers weren't even aware of the Viking hardcover edition . . . CRUISER DREAMS, the second installment in **Janet Morris's** Byzantine saga of the Kerrion Empire begun with DREAM DANCER, will be Berkley Books' hardcover release for the month . . . Berkley, too, has just concluded a three-book deal with **Sydney J. Van Scyoc** (whose SUNWAIFS appears in this issue) for a fantasy trilogy. The first book is to be titled DARKCHILD . . . big event at Farrar, Straus, & Giroux will be newcomer **Ted Mooney's** EASY TRAVEL TO OTHER PLANETS, which was eagerly bid for in an unusually aggressive auction for a first novel. Talented unknowns are almost guaranteed short shrift in a fanatically track-record-conscious marketplace, and FSG's courage and faith in this book is laudable.

**Elizabeth A. Lynn,** author of THE NORTHERN GIRL and THE DANCERS OF ARUN, is due with her first short-story collection, THE WOMAN WHO LOVED THE MOON, from Berkley Books. Readers unfamiliar with Lynn's lilting and beautiful prose are urged to look up this volume. The title story was a World Fantasy Award winner, and Lynn is one of the more genuine and searching talents in the field today. This sounds like publisher's puff but it's not. I mean every word of it. Lynn is an author going places.

**Michael Moorcock's** THE WAR HOUND AND THE WORLD'S

PAIN (Timescape/Simon & Schuster) is a baroque Moorcockian tour-de-force about a mercenary soldier's confrontation with the Devil during the 30 Years' War . . . **Clifford Simak** readers shouldn't miss the new Ace Books edition of CITY, complete with a previously uncollected story, appropriately entitled "Epilogue", originally published in the 1974 John W. Campbell Award Anthology . . .**Somtow Sucharitkul's** first and very subtle novel, STARSHIP & HAIKU, is available from Timescape/Pocket this month . . . **Philip José Farmer** has contracted with Berkley Books for a sequel to his first published novel, THE GREEN ODYSSEY . . . Bantam Books is launching a 21st-century detective series by **Mike McQuay.** The first title, published this month, is HOT TIME IN OLD TOWN with three more under contract.

Although horror fiction has long been a recognized article of the fantasy canon, it has recently attained the enviable stature of a



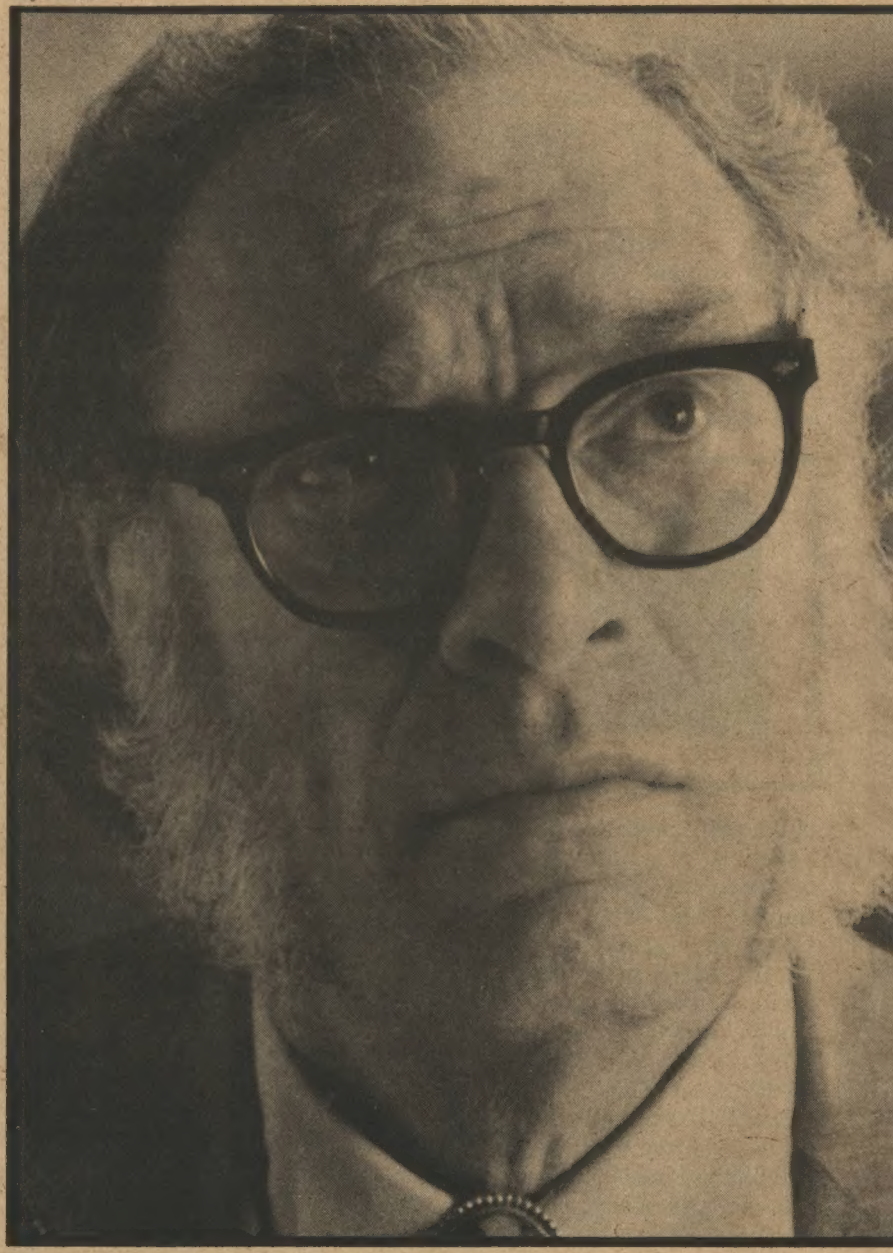
Stephen King

Coming from Berkley Books

Janet Morris

child who begins to tower over his parents. Five years ago publishers were confident the market could absorb no more but the cream seems to keep rising to the surface—thank goodness! Besides the excellent McCauley anthology mentioned above, **Charles L. Grant** has tipped in with a collection and two anthologies of scary stories. Many of World Fantasy Award-winner Grant's best short fiction can be found in TALES FROM THE NIGHT SIDE, available from Arkham House, the quality horror publisher from Sauk City, Wisconsin, complete with an introduction by Stephen King; HORRORS, from Playboy Press is a sequel to Grant's very successful NIGHTMARES anthology; and finally, SHADOWS 4 (Doubleday), a new volume in the original anthology series which has already established itself as the 'state of the art' in horror fiction. And, due out in November, is the long-awaited paperback edition of **Peter Straub's** SHADOWLAND. *—J.W. Silbersack*

Roy Schneider



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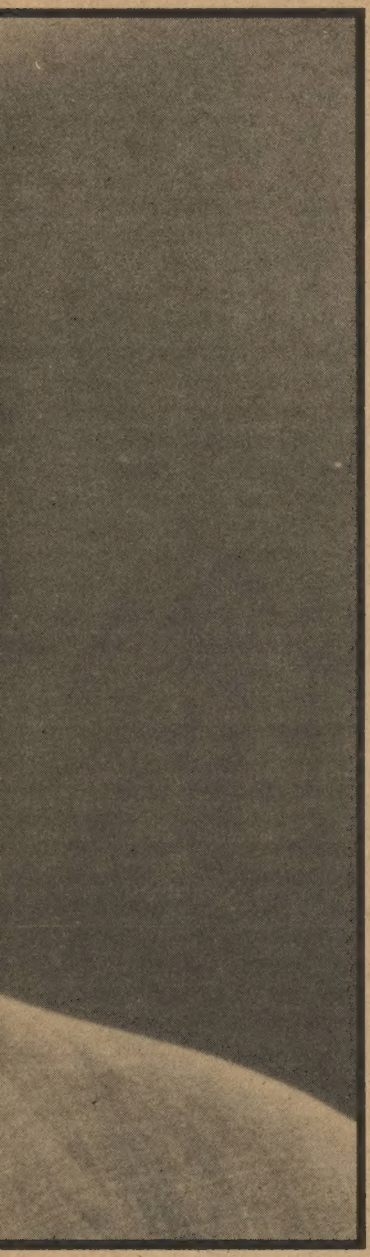

# ASIMOV ON SCIENCE FICTION

BY ISAAC ASIMOV

*Published by Doubleday, Inc.*

## HOW EASY TO SEE THE FUTURE!

If one were to glance over the thousands of years of history of Homo sapiens, we might make the following generalizations:

1) As time passed, the human way of life continually changed.

2) The change has generally resulted from a technological advance: a new tool, a new technique, a new energy source.

3) As each technological advance broadened the base of human technological capacity, further advances became more frequent and were made in a greater number of directions, so that the rate of change has, in the course of history, continually increased.

Until modern times, the rate of change was so slow as to make the process unnoticeable in the course of any one per-

son's lifetime. It was therefore the illusion of mankind that change did not take place. When, in the face of that illusion, a change had clearly taken place, the response was to view it as something that should not have taken place, as something that represented a degeneration from the "good old days."

The steadily increasing rate of change reached the stage, at about 1800, of becoming clearly visible to many thoughtful individuals. The Industrial Revolution was beginning, and those affected by it could detect change in the course of their own lifetimes.

For the first time, some people grew to understand that not only was change taking place, but that it would continue to take place after their deaths. It meant there would come to be changes still greater than a person had lived to see, changes that he would never see. This gave rise to a new curiosity —perhaps the first really new curiosity developed in historic times—that of wondering what life on Earth would be like after one was no longer alive. The literary response to that new curiosity was what we now call "science fiction."

Science fiction can be defined as that branch of literature which deals with the reaction of human beings to changes in science and technology.

The reference can be to *any* changes, of course, and the science fiction writer chooses those which provide him with a dramatic situation out of which he can weave an exciting plot. There is usually no deliberate attempt to predict what will actually happen, but a science fiction writer is a creature of his times, and in trying to imagine a change in science and technology he is quite likely to base it on those changes he already sees in embryo.

Often this means an extrapolation of the present, an extrapolation that is so clear and obvious as to forecast something that is inevitable. When this happens, the science fiction writer *does* make a successful prediction. Usually, this astonishes almost everyone, for mankind generally, even today, takes it for granted that things do not change.

Here is an example. As the twentieth century opened, oil was coming into use as a source of energy and, thanks to the internal-combustion engine, was beginning to gain on coal.

Now oil, like coal, is a fossil fuel. There is only so much of it in the ground—even if our entire planet were solid coal and oil, there is only so much of it in the ground—and new supplies are being formed at an entirely trivial rate. If oil and coal are being constantly burned, then someday the natural supply present in the ground will

be used up. That is not a matter of argument at all; it is inevitable. The only question is, When?

Mankind, generally, assuming that since there is oil in the ground today, there will be oil in the ground forever (the doctrine of no change), is not concerned with the matter. The science fiction writer, however, avidly seeking out change as a matter of artistic necessity, takes up the possibility of an end of our fossil-fuel supply. It then becomes possible for a science fiction writer to say:

"Coal is the key to metallurgy and oil to transit. When they are done we shall either have built up such a fabric of apparatus, knowledge, and social organization that we shall be able to manage without them—or we shall have travelled a long way down the slopes of waste towards extinction— Today, in getting, in distribution, in use, we waste enormously— As we sit there all the world is wasting fuel—fantastically."

That certainly sounds familiar in this year of 1975, but it wasn't said in 1975. The writer was H. G. Wells, and the book is *Secret Places of the Heart* (not even science fiction, strictly speaking) and the year of publication is 1921.

Imagine Wells foreseeing the energy crunch half a century before it happened! Well, don't waste your admiration. He saw the obvious and foresaw the inevitable. What is really amazing, and frustrating, is mankind's habit of *refusing* to see the obvious and inevitable until it is there, and then muttering about unforeseen catastrophes.

The science fiction writer, Laurence Manning, wrote a story called "The Man Who Awoke" about a man who invented a potion that would place him in suspended animation for three thousand years. He would then awake and see the world of the future. When he carried this through, he found the world of three thousand years hence was energy-poor. They explained the reason to him as a result of what they called the Age of Waste. They said,

"But for what should we thank the humans of three thousand years ago? For exhausting the coal supplies of the world? For leaving us no petroleum for our chemical factories? For destroying the forests on whole mountain ranges and letting the soil erode into the valleys?"

The story appeared in the March 1933 issue of *Wonder Stories* and I read it when it appeared; I had just turned thirteen. Science fiction, everyone said, was "escape literature." Reading it was disgraceful, for it meant turning away from the hard realities of life into a never-never fantasy land of the impossible.

Who lived in a never-never fantasy land? I, who began wor-

rying about our oil and coal in 1933 as a result of Manning's story? Or the rest of mankind who, as always, were convinced that tomorrow would be exactly like today and who waited for the day when the long lines at the gas station came before deciding that there might some day be long lines at the gas station.

Yes, science fiction can have its fantasy aspects. I have written stories about galactic empires, about faster-than-light speeds, time travel. I don't consider that any of these have predictive value; they weren't intended for that. I was just trying to write entertaining stories about the might-be, not at all necessarily about the would-be.

But sometimes—

In the July 1939 issue of *Astounding Science Fiction*, there appeared one of my stories. It was called "Trends" and it dealt with the first flight to the Moon (silly escape literature, of course). I got all the details childishly and ludicrously wrong, including having it happen ten years later than it really did happen.

However, even at the age of nineteen, I was aware that all those technological advances in the past that had significantly ruffled the current of human custom had been attacked by important segments of the population who, for one reason or another, found it difficult to accept change. It occurred to me, then, that this would surely be true of the development of space flight as well. My story "Trends," therefore, dealt primarily with opposition to space flight.

It was, as far as I know, the first description of ideological opposition to mankind's advance into space. Until then, all those who had looked forward to the new development had either ignored the reaction of humanity, or had assumed it would be favorable. When there did indeed arise ideological opposition, in the late 1960s, I found myself accepting credit as a seer, when I had merely foreseen the inevitable.

Once uranium fission was discovered, a nuclear bomb was an easy extrapolation, and through the World War II years, the science fiction stories dealing with nuclear bombs nestled as thickly as snowflakes in the pages of the science fiction magazines. One of them, "Deadline" by Cleve Cartmill, which appeared in the March 1944 issue of *Astounding Science Fiction*, came so close to the actual facts that both the author and the editor of the magazine were interviewed by suspicious intelligence agents. But when the bomb dropped on Hiroshima, the world was astonished.

More remarkable still was a story "Solution Unsatisfactory" by Anson Macdonald (a pseudonym of Robert A. Heinlein),

which appeared in the May 1941 issue of *Astounding Science Fiction*. Written and published before Pearl Harbor, Heinlein described a vast gathering of scientists called together to develop a nuclear weapon. The weapon was invented, used to end World War II, and a nuclear stalemate developed thereafter.

It all made sense, you see, in the light of what was already known in 1940, but who else foresaw it but science fiction writers?

Today we face the most predictable of all disasters, that of the consequences of overpopulation. The population of Earth is now 4,000,000,000 and that population is increasing at the rate of 2 percent a year, which means that each day there are 220,000 more mouths to feed than the day before.

In the course of the last thirty years, when population has risen by 1,500,000,000, the food supply has managed to keep up; thanks to the spreading use of farm machinery and irrigation pumps; of fertilizers and pesticides; and of an extraordinary run of good weather.

But now weather is taking a turn for the worse, and the energy shortage is slowing the machinery and raising the price of fertilizers and pesticides. The food supply will not be increasing anymore; it will probably go down—and with the population going up at a rate of 220,000 per day, isn't it the easiest and surest thing in the world to predict great and spreading famines?

Yet whenever I do, I am greeted with amused disbelief. After all, people look around and see no famine today, so why should there be famine tomorrow?

Now let's consider this: If science fiction writers foresee the problems and catastrophes that will come to face mankind, do they also foresee solutions?

Not necessarily! Science fiction writers foresee the inevitable, and although problems and catastrophes may be inevitable, solutions are not. Science fiction writers are all too often forced

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to pull solutions out of thin and implausible air—or leave the matter with no solution and end the story in dramatic disaster.

The best way to defeat a catastrophe is to take action to prevent it long before it happens. To conserve the oil and work for alternate sources of energy in time. To consider the international effects of the nuclear bomb before ever it is invented. To lower the birthrate before the population grows dangerously high.

To do that, one must foresee the catastrophe in time, and science fiction helps one do so.

## THE DREAMS OF SCIENCE FICTION

*In the last few years, popular science magazines have proliferated on the newsstands. As is to be expected, more were planned than actually appeared.*

*One that was planned was intended to have a strong futuristic outlook and, for that reason, the publishing house asked me to come up with two dozen or so themes for the future that were often dealt with in science fiction. I did as requested but, unfortunately, for reasons that had nothing to do with my manuscript, the magazine never appeared, and I did not have the chance to see what they would do with my comments.*

*I include it here because I consider it a good summary of the futuristic (and, possibly, predictive) aspects of science fiction, so that it may possibly be helpful to aspiring writers in the audience.*

**Population Control**—An indefinite population increase will surely bring about starvation and ruin the environment irretrievably. The human population on Earth cannot continue to increase for much longer, and the only way to prevent such an increase humanely, without bringing about the very death and destruction that will ruin our civilization (perhaps permanently), is to reduce the birthrate. Perhaps we can work out some chemical or hormonal control of reproduction that will have no undesirable side effects, or perhaps we can develop some benign social manipulation to reduce the birthrate.

**World Government**—It is quite clear that as long as the nations of the world spend most of their energy, money, and emotional strength in quarreling with words and weapons, a true offensive against the common problems that threaten human survival is not very likely. A world government that can channel human efforts in the direction of the great solutions seems desirable, even essential. Naturally, such a world government should be a federal one, with regional and local autonomy safeguarded and with cultural diversity promoted.

**Permanent Energy**

**Sources**—The industrial revolution was supported on the back of the fossil fuels, first coal and then oil—but both, especially the latter, are in temporary supply. If we are to continue advancing, we need energy sources that are permanent, safe, and copious. There are two clear alternatives: Earth may someday be run by nuclear fusion and solar power. A particularly advanced possibility is that Earth's energy would be supplied by a chain of solar-power stations in space along the equatorial plane. In this way energy would be a global matter and the nations of the world would be encouraged to unite in the common goal of maintaining an adequate energy supply.

**Weather Control**—Most of the great natural disasters involve weather extremes: heat waves and cold waves; droughts and floods; hurricanes, tornadoes, and blizzards. We already air-condition buildings and the time may come when the planet as a whole is air-conditioned, so to speak. Weather may have different patterns in different parts of the globe, but never to an extreme damaging to life. One possible way of insuring this would be to have our population centers retreat underground, where there is no weather, and where time-passage need not be fixed by the uncontrollable alternation between day and night.

**Robots**—Throughout history, human beings have used animals and other humans to do the brute manual labor of the world. Machines have now replaced muscle in many cases, but why not develop machines with an approach to human versatility, and for that matter, human appearance? Robots can be the new servants—patient, uncomplaining, incapable of revolt. In human shape they can make use of the full range of technological tools devised for human beings and, when intelligent enough, can be friends as well as servants.

**Computers**—Artificial intelligence need not be developed, as in robots, only for the purpose of physical labor and social service. Intelligence may reach the point where computers or artificial brains approach the human in capacity, or even surpass it. To be mentally equal, however, may not be the same as mentally equivalent. Computers, starting from a different point, developing along different lines and for different purposes, will have abilities and deficiencies that human beings don't have. Together, the strong points of each will supplement the weak points of the other, and, in cooperation, the two types of intelligences can advance more rapidly than either would alone.

**Computerized Education**—The advance of computers

makes the thought of a global computerized library a tenable one. It would be one from which any item of human knowledge could be retrieved. If communications satellites and laser beams are used to give each human being a private television channel, each human being can use his own computers to hook up to the computerized library, so that he will have an advanced teaching machine. Each individual could study whatever he wants at his own pace and in his own time, and the result could be that education can be efficient, pleasurable, and lifelong.

**Mass Transference**—It is very difficult to accelerate objects possessing mass. Radiation, however, on the very instant of creation, moves at the speed of light—186,282 miles per second. Is it conceivable that an object with mass, such as a loaded truck or a human being, be turned into radiation, beamed outward, received and turned back into a loaded truck or a human being? If so, all earthly distances could be traversed in fractions of a second and you could get to the Moon in a second and a quarter.

**Global Village**—We can already communicate at the speed of light and have done so since the invention of the telegraph in 1844. With the development of communications satellites and holography, we may use individual television channels in such a way that our three-dimensional image, rather than ourselves, travels in order to indulge in business meetings. There can be long-distance transmission of documents, long-distance control and supervision of factories, and so on. Combine this with mass transference, and with plentiful energy from space stations, and the whole planet shrinks to a global village in which any individual can interact with any other individual with no more trouble than if they lived on the same block. Such a situation makes a world government much more useful and practical.

**Cloning**—It is possible that eventually a new option may be developed for reproduction; one in which a given individual can have his gene content reproduced as such, without the admixture of other genes as is inevitable in sexual reproduction. Such cloning would have its uses. Endangered species might be saved by cloning. A clone might be developed in such a way as to form not a complete individual but merely specific organs. In this way, a bank of organs could be created that are genetically compatible with the individual whose cell nucleus had been used. Organ transplantation and replacement would become much more practical.

**Bionic Human Beings**—Failing or damaged organs

could be replaced by other organs, perhaps through cloning. Another alternative, however, would be the use of mechanical devices that would perform the function of various living organs, but might have advanced capabilities and be more durable. In a sense this would be a roboticization of human beings, and if robots could be made steadily more human in structure, the two types of intelligence might approach some more or less identical intermediate form that would be better than either the totally human or the totally robot.

**Genetic Engineering**—Individuals are, to some extent, the product of their genes and the time may come when scientists are able to determine the gene pattern of an individual at birth or before. Embryos may be developed in the laboratory instead of in the womb and gene defects could then be observed and corrected. If not correctible, the embryo could be disposed of. In this way, congenital disease may be avoided or corrected and a stronger human species developed. And women may be freed of the absolute necessity of turning their bodies into a baby-making machine periodically.

**Control of Evolution**—With increasing development of genetic engineering, it could become possible to alter genes or to direct those combinations that would produce desired characteristics. Microorganisms could be developed with enhanced chemical abilities that would be useful to humanity—to produce desired hormones or other biochemicals, to fix atmospheric nitrogen, to consume particular wastes, and so on. Human beings might be endowed with new abilities that would tend to increase health and happiness and would move us in the direction of an abler and more intelligent species.

**Telepathy**—The shortcomings of communication seem to hold back the progress of the human species. Different languages make some of us incomprehensible to others and introduce differences that serve as handles for hate and suspicion. Even among people speaking the same language, different accents can make trouble. And at best, language is an imperfect way of expressing thoughts. Might not a way be discovered eventually to allow mind to melt into mind directly, thought into thought, so that a telepathic society can result? Other "wild talents" such as telekinesis (moving things at a distance) or precognition (foreseeing some aspects of the future) might be developed, too.

**Exploitation of Near Space**—Space supplies us with many things we do not have enough of, or at all, on Earth. We can collect solar energy in

space more efficiently than we can on Earth's surface. The Moon is a new and untouched source of vast mineral supplies. Space itself offers us an infinite supply of hard vacuum, both high and low temperatures, hard radiation, gravity-free conditions—all of which are useful in various industrial processes. We could have whole industries, laboratories, observatories in orbit about the Earth run on Lunar material and Solar energy. This would free Earth of the various disadvantages of industrialization and return it to the benefits of an agricultural/pastoral/wilderness pattern, while not depriving it of the benefits of science and industry that would be only a few thousand miles away—straight up.

**Space Settlements**—If near space is the site of industries, laboratories, and observatories, there will have to be human beings in space to build, maintain, and run these various structures. They could live in artificial structures capable of supporting tens of thousands or even tens of millions of people apiece. Each would have an independent self-supporting ecology, and while their existence would never completely obviate the need for population control, space settlements would allow for further expansion and growth when Earth itself will have reached its limits.

**Interplanetary Travel**—With near space exploited and the Moon being used for its mineral wealth, it will be inevitable that human beings will try for the various other worlds of the Solar system. Eventually, human spaceships will be penetrating the Solar system to its farthest reaches, and permanent settlements will be established on a number of worlds.

**Terraforming**—None of the worlds of the Solar system, other than Earth, are now hospitable to human life. To settle such worlds, human beings would have to live under pressurized domes or underground. Earthlike conditions would have to be developed in relatively small regions. Why not, however, transform whole worlds into new Earths by importing water, or air, adjusting temperature, altering rotation rates, and so on? Human beings would have the freedom of the surface and could move about without space suits.

**Gravitational Control**—Gravitation is the predominant force in the Universe as a whole; the force that has been longest known is least understood and is the most intractable. If, somehow, a method for insulating gravitational force can be devised, travel through space would become much easier and cheaper. So would much of the work of the world.

**Interstellar Communication**—Even the nearest stars are

thousands of times as far away from us as even the farthest planets of our own Solar system. On planets round those stars, however, there may be intelligent species more advanced than ourselves, and they may be sending out signals, or they may perhaps be routinely communicating with each other. We might, on some occasion, be able to receive those signals or eavesdrop on the communication. We might even be able to interpret the messages, enter the communications ourselves, gain much knowledge, and advance rapidly to higher levels of understanding.

**Interstellar Travel**—The vast distances separating us from the stars may be conquerable. Gravity control may make matters easier and so may faster-than-light travel if that can be developed. Alternatively, huge starships might be built on which many generations of human beings can live and die during the trip to the stars. Or else, the space settlements themselves, which we would have built in the Solar system, would take off on the far journey. Alternately, other civilizations may visit us, coming, we hope, in peace so that we can learn from them and they from us.

**Black Holes**—Black holes represent portions of mass so great and so condensed that nothing can escape from them.

*(Continued on page 83)*

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CROWN

# SWARMER, SKIMMER

## BY GREGORY BENFORD

*Excerpted From "Across the Sea of Suns"*

Warren watched the *Manamix* going down. The ocean was in her and would smother the engines soon, swamping her into silence. Her lights still glowed in the mist and rain.

She lay on her starboard side, down by the head, and the swell took her solidly with a dull hammering. The strands that the Swarmers cast had laced across her decks and wrapped around the gun emplacements and over the men who had tended them.

The long green and yellow strands still licked up the sides and over the deck, seeking and sticking. They were spun out from the swollen belly pouches of the Swarmers. Their green bodies clustered in the dark water at the bows.

A long finger of tropical lightning cracked. It lit the wedge of space between the close black storm clouds and the rain-pocked, wrinkled skin of the sea. The big aliens glistened in the glare.

Warren treaded water and floated. He tried to make no noise. A strand floated nearby and a wave brushed him against it but there was no sting. The Swarmer it came from was probably dead and drifting down now. But there were many more in the crashing surf near the ship and he could hear screams from the other crewmen who had gone over the side with him.

The port davits on the top deck dangled, trailing ropes, and the lifeboats hung from them unevenly, useless. Warren had tried to get one down but

The invasion of Earth may not require war machines. Biological weapons can be just as deadly—and far more horrifying.

*Copyright © 1981 by Gregory Benford*

William Tuttle

the winch and cabling fouled and he had finally gone over the side like the rest.

Her running lights winked and then came on steady again. The strands made a tangled net over the decks now. Once they stunned a man, the sticky yellow nerve sap stopped coming and they lost their sting. As he watched, bobbing in the waves, one of the big aliens amidships rolled and brought in its strand and pulled a body over the railing. The man was dead and when the body hit the water there was some quick fighting over it.

Wisps of steam curled from the engine room hatch. He thought he could hear the whine of the diesels. Her port screw was clear and spinning like a metal flower. In the hull plates he could see the ragged holes punched by the packs of Swarmers. She was filling fast now.

Warren knew the jets the Filipinos had promised the captain would never get out this far. It was a driving, splintering storm and to drop the canisters of poison that would kill the Swarmers would take low and dangerous flying. The Filipinos would not risk it.

She went without warning. The swell came over her bows and the funnel slanted down fast. The black water poured into her and into the high hoods of her ventilators and the running lights started to go out. The dark gully of her forward promenade and bay filled and steam came gushing up from the hatches like a giant thing exhaling.

He braced himself for it, thinking of the engine he had tended, and the sudden deep booming came as the sea reached in and her boilers blew. She slid in fast. Lightning crackled and was reflected in a thousand shattered mirrors of the sea. The waters accepted her and the last he saw was a huge rush of steam as great chords boomed in her hull.

In the quiet afterward, calls and then screams came to him, carried on the gusts. There had been so many men going off the aft deck the Swarmers had missed him. Now they had coiled their strands back in and would find him soon. He began to kick, floating on his back, trying not to splash.

Something brushed his leg. He went limp.

It came again.

He pressed the fear back, far away from him. The thing was down there in the blackness, seeing only by its phosphorescent stripes along the jaw line. If it caught some movement—

A wave rolled him over. He floated face down and did nothing about it. A wave rocked him and then another and his face came out for an instant and he took a gasp of air. Slowly he let

the current turn him to the left until a slit of his mouth broke clear and he could suck in small gulps of air.

The cool touch came at a foot. A hip. He waited. He let the air bubble out of him slowly when his chest started to burn so that he would have empty lungs when he broke surface. A slick skin rubbed against him. His throat began to go tight. His head went under again and he felt himself in the black without weight and saw a dim glimmering, a wash of silvery light like stars—and he realized he was staring at the Swarmer's grinning phosphorescent jaw.

The fire in his throat and chest was steady and he struggled to keep them from going into spasm. The grin of gray light came closer. Something cold touched his chest, nuzzled him, pushed—

A wave broke hard over him and he tumbled and was in the open, face up, gasping, ears ringing. The wave was deep and he took two quick breaths before the water closed over him again.

He opened his eyes in the dark water. Nothing. No light anywhere. He could not risk a kick to take him to the air. He waited to bob up again, and did, and this time saw something riding down the wave near him. A lifeboat.

He made a slow easy stroke toward it. Nothing touched him. If the Swarmer had already eaten it might just have been curious. Maybe it was not making its turn and coming back.

A wave, a stroke, a wave—He stretched and caught the trailing aft line. He wrenched himself up and sprawled aboard, rattling the oars in the gunwale. Quietly he paddled toward the weakening shouts. Then the current took him to starboard. He did not use the oars in the locks because they would clank and the sound would carry. He pulled toward the sounds but they faded. A fog came behind the rain.

There was a foot of water in the boat and the planking was splintered where a Swarmer tried to stove it in. A case of supplies was still clamped in the gunwale.

A while later he sighted a smudge of yellow. It was the woman, Rosa, clinging to a life jacket she had got on wrong. He had been staying down in the boat to keep hidden from the Swarmers but without thinking about it he pulled her aboard.

She was a journalist he had seen before on the *Manamix*. She was covering the voyage for Brazilian TV and wanted to take this fast run down from Taiwan to Manila. She had said she wanted to see a Swarm beaten off and her camera crew was on deck all day bothering the crew.

She sat aft and huddled down and then after a time started to talk. He covered her mouth. Her

eyes rolled from side to side, searching the water. Warren paddled slowly. He wore jeans and a long-sleeved shirt and even soaked they kept off the night chill. The fog was thick. They heard some distant splashes and once a rifle shot. The fog blotted out the sounds.

They ate some of the provisions when it got light enough to see. Warren felt the planking for seepage and he could tell it was getting worse.

A warm dawn broke over them. Wreckage drifted nearby. There were uprooted trees, probably carried out to sea by the storm. The rain had started just as the first packs struck the bows. That had made it harder to hit them with the automatic rifles on deck and Warren was pretty sure the Swarmers knew that.

There was smashed planking from other boats near them, an empty box, some thin twine, life jackets, bottles. No one had ever seen Swarmers show interest in debris in the water, only prey. The things had no tools. Certainly they had not made the ships that dropped into the atmosphere and seeded the oceans. Those craft would have been worth looking at but they had broken up on the seas and sunk before anyone could get to them.

The wreckage would not attract Swarmers but they might be following the current to find survivors. Warren knew no school of Swarmers was nearby because they always broke surface while in a Swarm and you could see the mass of them from a long way off. There were always the lone Swarmers that some people thought were scouts, though. Nobody really knew what they did but they were just as dangerous as the others.

He could not steer well enough to pick up wreckage. The boat was taking on more water and he did not think they had much time. They needed the drifting wood and he had to swim for it. Five times he went in the water and each time he had to push the fear away from him and swim as smoothly and quietly as he could until finally the fear came strongly and he could not do it any more.

He skinned the bark from two big logs, using the knife from the provisions case, and made lashings. The boat was shipping water now as it rolled in the swell. He and Rosa cut and lashed and built. When they had a frame of logs they broke up the boat and used some of the planks for decking. The boat sank before they could save most of it but they got the case onto the raft.

He pried nails out of some of the driftwood. By now his vision was blurring in the bright sunlight and he was clumsy. They cleared a space in the

frame to lie on and Rosa fell asleep while he was pounding in the last board. Each task he had now was at the end of a tunnel and he peered through it at his hands doing the job and they were dumb and thick as though he was wearing gloves. He secured the case and other loose pieces and hooked his right arm over a limb to keep from falling overboard. He fell asleep face down.

## II.

The next day as he got more driftwood and lashed it into the raft there was a slow, burning, pointless kind of anger in him. He could have stayed on land and lived off the dole. He had known the risks when he signed on as engineer.

It had been six years since the first signs of the aliens. With each year more ships had gone down, hulled in deep water and beyond protection from the air. The small craft, fishermen and the like, had been first to go. That did not change things much. Then the Swarmers multiplied and cargo vessels started going down. Trade across open seas was impossible.

The oceanographers and biologists said they were starting to understand the Swarmer mating and attack modes by that time. It was slow work. Studying them on the open water was dangerous. When they were captured they hammered themselves against the walls of their containers until the jutting bone of their foreheads shattered and drove splinters into their brains.

Then the Swarmers began taking bigger ships. They found a way to mass together and hull even the big supertankers.

By then the oceanographers were dying, too, in their reinforced-hull research ships. The Swarmers could sink anything then and no one could explain how they had learned to modify their tactics. The things did not have particularly large brains.

There were reports of strange-looking Swarmers, of strays from the schools, of massed Swarmers who could take a ship down in minutes. Then came photographs of a totally new form, the Skimmers, who leaped and dove deep and were smaller than the Swarmers. The specimens had been killed by probots at depths below 200 fathoms, where Swarmers had never been seen.

The automatic stations and hunters were the only way men could study the Swarmers by that time. Large cargo vessels could not sail safely. Oil did not move from the Antarctic or China or the Americas. Wheat stayed in the farm nations. The intricate world economy ground down.

Warren had been out of work and stranded in the chaos of Tokyo. His wife had left him years before so he had no par-

ticular place to go. When the *Manamix* advertised that it had special plates in her hull and deck defenses he signed into a berth. The pay was good and there was no other sea work anyway. He could have run on the skimships that raced across the Taiwan Straits or to Korea, but those craft did not need engineers. If their engines ever went out they were finished before any repair could get done because the loud motors always drew the Swarmers in their wake.

Warren was an engineer and he wanted to stick to what he knew. He had worked hard for the rating. The heavy plates in the fore and aft holds had looked strong to him. But they had buckled inside of half an hour.

Rosa held up well at first. They never saw any other survivors of the *Manamix*. They snagged more wreckage and logs and lashed it together. Floating with the wood they found a coil of wire and an aluminum railing. He pounded the railing into nails and they made a lean-to for protection from the sun.

They were drifting northwest at first. Then the current shifted and took them east. He wondered if a search pattern could allow for that and find them.

One night he took Rosa with a power and confidence he had not felt since years before, with his wife. It surprised him.

They ate the cans of provisions. He used some scraps for bait and caught a few fish but they were small. She knew a way to make the twine tight and springy. He used it to make a bow and arrow and it was accurate enough to shoot fish if they came close.

Their water began to run out. Rosa kept their stores under the lean-to and at seven days Warren found the water was almost gone. She had been drinking more than her share.

"I had to," she said, backing away from him at a crouch. "I can't stand it, I . . . I get so bad. And the sun, it's too hot, I just . . ."

He wanted to stop but he could not and he hit her several times. There was no satisfaction in it.

Through the afternoon Rosa cringed at a corner of the raft and Warren lay under the lean-to and thought. In the cool, orderly limits of the problem he found a kind of rest. He squatted on a plank and rocked with the swell and inside, where he had come to live more and more these past years, the world was not just the gurgle and rush of waves and the bleaching raw edge of salt and sun. Inside there were the books and the diagrams and things he had known. He struggled to put them together.

Chemistry. He cut a small slit

in the rubber stopper of a water can and lowered it into the sea on a long fishing line.

The deeper water was cold. He pulled the can up and put it inside a bigger can. It steamed like a champagne bucket. Water beaded on the outside of the small can. The big can held the drops. It was free of salt but there was not much.

Nine days out the water was gone. Rosa cried. Warren tried to find a way to make the condensing better but they did not have many cans. The yield was no more than a mouthful a day.

In the late afternoon of that day Rosa suddenly hit him and started shouting filthy names. She said he was a sailor and should get them water and get them to land and when they finally did get picked up she would tell everybody how bad a sailor he was and how they had nearly died because he did not know how to find the land.

He let her run down and stayed away from her. If she scratched him with her long fingernails the wound would heal badly and there was no point in taking a risk. They had not taken any fish on the lines for a long time now and they were getting weaker. The effort of hauling up the cans from below made his arms tremble.

The next day the sea ran high. The raft groaned, rising sluggishly and plunging hard. Waves washed them again and again so it was impossible to sleep or even rest. At dusk Warren discovered jelly seahorses as big as a thumbnail riding in the foam that lapped over the raft. He stared at them and tried to remember what he had learned of biology.

If they started drinking anything with a high salt content the end would come fast. But they had to have something. He put a few on his tongue, tentatively, and waited until they melted. They were salty and fishy but seemed less salty than sea water. The cool moisture seemed right and his throat welcomed it. He spoke to Rosa and showed her and they gathered handfuls of the seahorses until nightfall.

On the eleventh day there were no seahorses and the sun pounded at them. Rosa had made hats for them, using cloth from the wreckage. That helped with the worst of the day but to get through the hours Warren had to sit with closed eyes under the lean-to, carefully working through the clear hallways of his mind.

The temptation to drink sea water was festering in him, flooding the clean places inside him where he had withdrawn. He kept before him the chain of things to keep himself intact.

If he drank sea water he would take in a quantity of dissolved salt. The body did not need much salt so it had to get rid of

most of what he took in. The kidneys would sponge up the salt from his blood and secrete it. But doing that took pure water, at least a pint a day.

The waves churned before him and he felt the rocking of the deck and he made it into a chant.

Drink a pint of sea water a day. The body turns it into about twenty cubic centimeters of pure water.

But the kidneys need more than that to process the salt. They react. They take water from the body tissues.

The body dries out. The tongue turns black. Nausea. Fever. Death.

He sat there for hours, reciting it, polishing it down to a few key words, making it perfect. He told it to Rosa and she did not understand but that was all right.

In the long afternoon he squinted against the glare and the world became one of sounds. The rattling of their cans came to him against the murmur of the sea and the hollow slap of waves against the underside of the raft. Then there was a deep thump. He peered to starboard. A rippling in the water. Rosa sat up. He gestured for silence. The planks and logs creaked and worked against each other and the thump came again.

He had heard dolphins knocking under the raft before and this was not their playful string of taps. Warren crawled out from the lean-to and into the yellow sunlight and a big green form broke surface and rolled belly-over, goggling at them with a bulging eye. Its mouth was like a slash in the blunt face. The teeth were narrow and sharp.

Rosa cried in terror and the Swarmer seemed to hear her. It circled the raft, following her awkward scuttling. She screamed and moved faster but the big thing flicked its tail and kept alongside her.

His concentration narrowed to an absolute problem that took in the Swarmer and its circling and the closed geometry of the raft. If they let it come in when it chose, it would lunge against the raft and catch them off balance and have a good chance of tumbling them into the water or breaking up the raft.

The green form turned and dove deep under the raft.

"Rosa!" He tore off his shirt. "Here! Wave it in the water on the side." He dipped the shirt, crouching at the edge. "Like this."

She hung back. "I . . . but . . . no, I . . ."

"Damn it! I'll stop it before it gets to you."

She gaped at him and the Swarmer broke water on the far side of the raft. It rolled ponderously, as if it was having trouble understanding how to attack a thing so much smaller than a ship, and attack it alone.

Rosa took the shirt hesitantly. He encouraged her and she bent over and swished a tip of it in the surf. "Good."

Warren brought out the crude arrow he had made with a centimeter-thick slat from the *Manamix* lifeboat. He had tapered it down and driven a nail in the head. He tucked the arrow into the rubber strip of his bow and tested it. The arrow had a line on it and did not fly very straight. Not much good for fish.

He slitted his eyes against the glare and looked out at the shallow troughs. The sea warped and rippled where the thing had just disappeared. Warren sensed that it had judged them now and was gliding back in the blue shadows under the raft, coming around for its final pass. It would not see the shirt until it turned and that would bring it up and near the corner where Warren now stood, between its path and Rosa. He drew the arrow back in a smooth motion, sighting, straining, sighting—

Rosa saw the dim shape first. She flicked the rag out of the water with a jerk. Warren saw something dart up, seeming to come up out of the floor of the ocean itself, catching the refracted bands of light from the waves.

Rosa screamed and stepped back. The snout broke water and the mouth like a cut was leering at them, and Warren let go the arrow *thunk* and followed it forward, scrabbling on all fours. The thing had the arrow in under the gills and the big flaps of green flesh bulged and flared open in spasms as it rolled to the side.

Warren snatched at the arrow line and missed. "Grab the end!" he called. The arrow was enough to stun the Swarmer but that was all. The thing was stunned with the nail driven deep in it but Warren wanted more of it now, more than just the killing of it, and he splashed partway off the raft to reach the snout and drag it in. He got a slippery grip on a big blue ventral fin. The mouth snapped. It thrashed and Warren used the motion to haul it toward the raft. He swung himself, the wood cutting into his hip, and levered the body partway onto the deck. Rosa took a fin and pulled. He used the pitch of the deck and his weight to flip the thing over on its side. It arched its back, twisting to gain leverage to thrash back over the side. Warren had his knife out and as the thing slid away from him he drove the blade in, slipping it through soft tissue at the side and riding up against the spine. Warren slashed down the body, feeling the Swarmer convulse in agony. Then it straightened and seemed to get smaller.

The two stood back and looked at the scaly green body, three meters long. Its weight made the raft dip in the swell.

Something sticky was beginning to drain from the long cut. Warren fetched a can and scooped up the stuff. It was a thin, pale yellow fluid. He did not hear Rosa's whimpering, stumbling approach as he lifted the can to his lips.

He caught the cool, slightly acrid taste of it for an instant. He opened his mouth wider to take it in. She struck the can from his hands. It clattered on the deck.

His punch drove her to her knees. "Why?" he yelled. "What do you care—"

"Wrong," she sputtered out. "Ugly. They're not . . . not *normal* . . . to . . . to eat."

"You want to drink? Want to live?"

She shook her head, blinking. "Na . . . ah, yeah, but . . . not that. Maybe . . ."

He looked at her coldly and she moved away. The carcass was dripping. He wedged it against a log and propped cans under it. He drank the first filled can, and the second.

The dorsal and ventral fins sagged in death. In the water he had seen them spread wide as wings. The bulging brain case and the goggle eyes seemed out of place, even in the strange face with its squeezed look. The rest of the body was sleek like the large fish. He had heard somebody say that evolution forced the same slim contours on any fast thing that lived in an ocean, even on submarines.

The Swarmer had scaly patches around the forefins and at each ventral fin. The skin looked like it was getting thick and hard. Warren did not remember seeing that in the photographs of dead ones but then the articles and movies had not said anything about the Swarmer scouts either until a year ago. They kept changing.

Rosa crouched under the lean-to. Once, when he drank, she spat out some word he could not understand.

The third can he set down on the boards halfway between them. He cut into the body and found the soft pulpy places where it was vulnerable to an arrow. He learned the veins and arteries and ropes of muscle. There were big spaces in the head that had something to do with hearing. In the belly pouch the strand was shriveled and laced with a kind of blue muscle. Around the fins where the skin became scaly there were little bones and cartilage that did not seem to have any use.

Rosa edged closer as he worked. The heat weighed on her. She licked her lips until they were raw and finally she drank.

He kept track of the days by making a cut each morning in a tree limb. The ritual sawing became crucial, part of the struggle. The itching salt spray

and the hammering of the sun blurred distinctions. In the simple counting he found there was some order, the beauty of number that existed outside the steady rub of the sea's green sameness.

Between the two of them they made the killing of the Swarmers a ritual as well. The scouts came at random intervals now, with never more than three days of waiting until the next thumping probes at the planking. Then Rosa would stoop and wave the shirt in the water. The thing would make a pass to look and then turn to strike, coming by the jutting corner, and Warren would drive the arrow into the soft place.

Rosa would crouch under the shelter then and mumble to herself and wait for him to gut it and bleed the watery pouches of fin fluid and finally take the sour syrup from behind the eyes.

With each fresh kill he learned more. They cut up some cloth and made small bags to hold the richer parts of the carcass and then chewed it for each drop. Sometimes it made them sick. After that he twisted chunks of the flesh in a cloth bag and let the drops air in the sun. That was not so bad. They ate the big slabs of flesh but it was the fluid they needed most.

With each kill Rosa became more distant. She sat dreamily swaying at the center of their plank island, humming and singing to herself, coiling inward. Warren worked and thought.

On the twenty-first day of drifting she woke him. He came up reluctantly from the vague, shifting sleep. She was shouting.

Darting away into the bleak dawn was something lean and blue. It leaped into the air and plunged with a shower of foam and then almost in the same instant was flying out of the steep wall of a wave, turning in the gleaming fresh sun.

"A Skimmer," he murmured. It was the first he had ever seen.

Rosa cried out. Warren stared out into the hills and valleys of moving water, blinking, following her finger. A gray cylinder the size of his hand floated ten meters away.

He picked up the tree limb they used for marking the days. His hands were puffed up now from the constant damp and the bark of the limb scraped them. No green shapes moved below. He rocked with the swell, waiting at the edge of the raft for a random current to bring the gray thing closer.

A long time passed. It bobbed sluggishly and came no closer. Warren leaned against the pitch of the deck and stretched for it. The limb was short at least a meter.

He swayed back, relaxing, letting the clenching in his muscles ease away. His arms trembled.

He could swim to it in a few quick strokes, turn and get back in a few—

No. If he let go he would be sucked into the same endless caverns that Rosa was wandering. He had to hold on. And take no risks.

He stepped back. The thing to do was wait and see if—

White spray exploded in front of him. The lean form shot up into the air and Warren rolled back away from it. He came up with the knife held close to him.

But the Skimmer arced away from the raft. It cut back into a wave and was gone for an instant and then burst up and caught the cylinder in its slanting mouth. In the air it rolled and snapped its head. The cylinder clunked onto the raft. The Skimmer leaped again, blue-white, and was gone into the endlessly shifting faces of green marble.

Rosa was huddled in the shelter. Warren picked up the cylinder carefully. It was smooth and regular but something about it told him it had not been made with tools. There were small flaws in the soft, foamy gray, like the blotches on a tomato. At one end it puckered as though a tassel had fallen away.

He rubbed it, pulled at it, turned the ends— It split with a moist pop. Inside there curled a thick sheet of the same softly resistant gray stuff. He unrolled it.

SECHTON XMENAPU DE AN LANSDORFKOPPEN SW BY W ABLE SAGON MXIL VESSE L ANSAGEN MANLATS WIR UNS? FTH AS-DØLENGS ERTY EARTHN PRO-FUILEN CO NISHI NAGARE KALLEN KOPFT EARTHN UMI

He studied the combinations and tried to fit them together so there was some logic to it. It was no code, he guessed. Some of the words were German and there was some English and Japanese, but most of it was either meaningless or no language he knew. VESSE L might be *vessel*. ANSAGEN—to say? He wished he remembered more of the German he had picked up in the merchant marine.

The words were in a clear typeface like a newspaper and were burned into the sheet.

He could make no more of it. Rosa did not want to look at the sheet. When he made her, she shook her head, no, she could not pick out any new words.

A Swarmer came later that day. Rosa did not back away fast enough and the big shape shot up out of the water. It bit down hard on the shirt as Warren's arrow took it and the impact made the blunt head snap back. Rosa was not ready for it and she stumbled forward and into the sea. The Swarmer tried to flip away. Warren caught her as she went into the water. The alien lunged at her but he heaved her back onto the deck. He had

dropped the bow. The Swarmer rolled and the bow washed overboard and then the tail fins caught the edge of the raft and it twisted and came tumbling aboard. Warren hit it with the tree limb. It kept thrashing but the blows stunned it. He waited for the right angle and then slipped the knife in deep, away from the snapping jaws, and the thing went still.

Rosa would not help him with cutting up. He sighted the bow floating nearby and was able to get it back. It would take him a while to talk Rosa back into baiting the Swarmers with the shirt but they had enough in their bellies now to last them a few days. The important thing was whether to let a Swarmer get away, knowing about the raft. So far they had killed each one. If these loners were scouting for the schools or a big pack, letting one go was sure death.

The next day a Skimmer came and leaped near the raft and there was another cylinder. It swam away, a blur of motion.

He read the sheet.

GEFAHRLICH GROSS HIRO ADFIN SOLID MNX 8 SHIO NISHI. KURO NAGARE. ANAXLE UNS NORMEN 286 W SCATTER PORTLINE ZERO NAGARE. NISHI.

He could not make any sense of it. Rosa shook her head again and began swaying and singing. He tried to scratch marks on the sheets, thinking that he could send them something, ask questions. The sheet would not take an impression.

A Swarmer surfaced to the west the next day. Rosa shrieked and told him that she would not try to lure it to the raft. He watched the thing and it circled them twice. Then it dove and did not come back. He thought about that and the message but none of these things had meaning. Some of the second message was German but he did not know much of what it said or any of the Japanese.

The next morning at dawn he woke suddenly and thought there was something near the raft. The swell was smooth and orange as the sun caught it. On the glassy horizon he saw nothing. He was very hungry and he remembered the Swarmer from yesterday. He had used the meat from the first kills to bait their lines but nothing bit. He wondered if that was because the fish would not take Swarmer meat or if there were no fish down there to have. The aliens had been changing the food chain in the oceans, he had read about that.

Then he saw the gray dot floating far away. The raft was drifting toward it and in a few minutes he snagged it. The message said

CONSQUE KPOF AMN SOLID. DA ØLEN MACHEN SMALL YOUTH

SCHLECHT UNS. DERINGER CHANGE DA. UNS B WSW. SAGEN ARBEIT BEI MOUTH. SHIMA CIRCLE STEIN NONGO NONGO UMI DRASVITCH YOU.

He peered at the words and squatted on the deck and felt the long dragging minutes go by. If he could—

"Warren! Wa-Warren!" Rosa called. He followed her gesture.

A blur on the horizon. It dipped and rose among the ragged waves. Warren breathed deeply. "Land."

Rosa's eyes swelled and she barked out a sharp cackling laugh. Her lips went white with the laughing and she cried, "Yeah! Yeah! Land!" and shook her fists in the air.

Warren measured with his eyes the current and the angle the brown smudge ahead made with their course. They would not reach it by drifting.

He worked quickly.

He took the tree limb and knocked away the supports of the lean-to. In the center of the raft he knelt and measured out the distances with hands and fingers and worked a hole in between two planks. He could wedge the limb into it. He made a collar out of strips of bark. The limb was crooked but it made a vertical beam.

He took the plywood sheet of the lean-to and lashed it to the limb. With the knife he dug stays in the plywood. The wire that held the logs in place in the deck would have been good to use but he could not risk unlashing them. He used the last of their twine instead, passing it through the stays in the plywood and making them into trailing lines. The plywood was standing up now like a sail catching the wind, and by pulling the twine he could tack. The raft took the waves badly but by turning the plywood sheet he could take the strain off the weak places where the logs and boards met.

The wind backed into the east in late morning. They could not make much headway and the land was still a dark strip on the horizon. Warren broke off a big piece of wood at the raft corner. He hacked at it with the knife. A Swarmer surfaced nearby and Rosa started her screeching. He hit her and watched the Swarmer but he never stopped whittling at the wood in his lap. The Swarmer circled once and then swam away to the south.

He finished with the wood. He made a housing for it with the rest of the bark strips. It sat badly at the end of the raft but the broad part dug into the water and by leaning against the top of it he could hold the angle. He got Rosa to hold two blocks of wood against the shaft for leverage and that way the thing worked something like a rudder. The raft turned to the south, toward the land.

Noon passed. Warren fought the wind and the rudder and tried to estimate the distance and the time left. If dark came before they reached it the current would take them past the land and they would never be able to beat back against the wind to find it again. He had been so long away from firm ground that he felt a need for it that was worse than his hunger. The pitch of the deck took the energy out of you day and night, you could not sleep for holding on to the deck when the sea got high, and you would do anything for something solid under you, for just—

Solid.

The message had said *solid*. Did that mean land? *Gefahrlich gross* something something *solid*. *Gefahrlich* had some kind of feel to it, something about bad or dangerous, he thought. *Gross* was *big*. Dangerous big blank blank land? Then some Japanese and other things and then *scatter portline zero*. *Scatter*. Make to go away?

Warren sweated and thought. Rosa brought him an old piece of Swarmer but he could not eat it. He thought about the words and saw there was some key to them, some beauty in it.

The rudder creaked against the wooden chocks. It was coming on to late afternoon. Rosa moved around the raft, when he did not need her, humming to herself, the Swarmers forgotten, eating from the pieces of meat still left. She was eating out of turn but he needed all his thought now for the problem.

They were coming in on the northern shore. He would bring them in at a graze, to have a look before beaching. The current fought against them but the plywood was enough to sweep them to the south.

South? What was there . . .

WSW. West south west?

UNS B WSW.

*Uns* was *we* in German, he was pretty sure of that. We be WSW? On the WSW part of the land? The island? Or WSW of the island? We—the Skimmers.

He noticed Rosa squatting in the bow of the raft, eager, her weight dipping the boards into the blue-green swell and bringing hissing foam over the planks. It slowed them but she did not seem to see that. He opened his mouth to yell at her and then closed it. If they went slow he would have more time. . .

The Skimmers were all he had out here and they had tried to tell him . . .

*Portline*. Port was left. A line to the left? They were coming in from the northeast as near as he could judge. Veering left would take them around and to the southwest. Or WSW.

The island seemed to grow fast now as the sun set behind it. Warren squinted against the glare on the waves. There was something between them and

the island. At the top of a wave he strained to see and could make out a darker line against pale sand. White rolls of surf broke on it.

A reef. The island was going to be harder to reach. He would have to bring the raft in easy and search for a passage. Either that or smash up on it and swim the lagoon, if there was no way through the circle of coral around—

*Circle stein nongo.* He did not know what *stein* was, something to drink out of or something, but the rest might say *don't go in the circle.*

Warren slammed the tiller over full. It groaned and the collar nearly buckled but he held it, throwing his shoulder into it.

Rosa grunted and glared at him. The raft tacked to port. He pulled the twine and brought the plywood further into the wind.

*Small youth schlecht uns.* The Swarmers were bigger than the Skimmers but they might mean smaller in some other way. Smaller development? Smaller brain? *Schlecht uns.* Something about *us* and the Swarmers. If they were younger than the Skimmers, maybe their development was still to come. Something told him that *schlecht* was a word like *gefahrlich* but what the difference was he did not know. *Swarmers dangerous us?* There was nothing in the words to show action, to show who *us* was. Did *us* include Warren?

Rosa stumbled toward him. The swell was coming abaft now and she clutched at him for support. "Wha'? Land! Go!"

He rubbed his eyes and focused on her face but it looked different in the waning light. He saw that in all the days they had been together he had never known her. The face was just a face. There had never been enough words between them to make the face into something else. He . . .

The wind shifted and he shrugged away the distraction and worked the twine. He studied the dark green mass ahead. It was thickly wooded and there were bare patches and a beach. The reef and the breaking surf were clear now. It was a thick reef—

There were things moving on the beach.

At first he thought they were driftwood, logs swept in by a storm. Then he saw one move and then another and they were green bodies in the sand. They crawled inland on stubs where they had once had fins. They moved painfully. A few had made it to the line of trees at the edge of the sand.

*Small youth.* Young ones who were still developing.

He stood numbly watching the island draw near. He dimly felt Rosa pounding on his chest and shrieking. "Crazy! Crazy! We die if we do not—"

"What?" His lips felt thick.

"You 'fraid! 'Fraid the rocks." She gaped at him and said something in Spanish or Portuguese, something angry and full of scorn. Her eyes bulged unnaturally. "No *man* would . . ."

"Shut up." They were rushing by the island now, drawn by the fast currents.

"Na . . . Na, I won't." She looked around wildly. "Swim."

She scrabbled along the deck and found a large board that was working loose. She pulled at it.

Warren breathed deeply to try to clear his head and felt a calm swell up in him. He would do one last thing for her and if—

He let the tiller drift a moment and went to help her. Together they got the board free. "Look to the island," he said clearly to her. "That's not where they were telling us to go. You'll see, the things—"

"Nothing," she said fiercely. "Just an island." She peered through the dusk and shook her head. "Nothing."

Warren followed her gaze and saw the fleshy stubs that had been fins and now dragged the heavy bodies, working against the sand. Then he blinked and there were logs on the beach that were covered with a green moss and the surf broke over some of them and rolled them.

"I . . . don't . . ."

Rosa shook her head impatiently and screamed something at him he could not understand. The reef swept by only meters away and then its dark mass faded and a clear spot came, a passage through. He studied it and looked toward the beach again. Things were becoming darker. Something splashed beside the raft and he remembered distantly the leaping Skimmers and the way they moved. He saw that Rosa was gone.

She was floating on the board and paddling through the passage. The logs on the beach rolled peacefully in the surf.

The trade wind was coming fresh and the sunset was hard and bright in the west. He tacked out free of the reef and turned WSW. When he looked back at the beach it was surprisingly difficult to see the forms like huge lungfish struggling up onto their new home. Darkness was falling. Under the wind the sea broke into oily facets that became a field of mirrors reflecting shattered images of the orange sky and the land and the raft.

The logs on the beach did not move. He felt the tug of the twine and made a change in heading to steady a yaw.

He gathered speed. When the thin scream came out of the dusk behind him he did not turn around.

## III.

The wind had backed into the northeast and was coming up

strong again. Warren watched the sullen clouds moving in. He shook his head. It was still hard for him to leave his sleep.

It was three days now since he had passed the island. He had thought much about the thing with Rosa. When his head was clear he was certain that he had made no mistake. He had let her do what she wanted and if she had not understood it was because he could not find a way to tell her. It was the sea itself which taught and the Skimmers too and you had to listen. Rosa had listened only to herself and her belly.

On the second day past the island the air had become thick and a storm came down from the north. He had thought it was a squall until the deck began to pitch at steep angles and a piece broke away with a groan. Then he had lashed himself to the log and tried to pull the plywood sheet down. He could reach it but the collar he had made out of his belt was slippery with rain. He pulled at the cracked leather. He thought of using the knife to cut the sheet free but then the belt would be no good. He twisted at the stiff knot and then the first big wave broke into foam over the deck and he lost it. The waves came fast then and he could not get to his feet. When he looked up it was dark overhead and the plywood was wrenched away from the mast. The wind battered it against the mast and the collar at the top hung free. A big wave slapped him and when next he saw the sheet it had splintered. A piece fell to the deck and Warren groped for it and slipped on the worn planking. A wave carried the piece over the side. The boards of the deck worked against each other and there was more splintering among them. Warren held onto the log. The second collar on the mast broke and the sheet slammed into the deck near him. He reached for it with one hand and felt something cut into his arm. The deck pitched. The plywood sheet fell backward and then slid and was over the side before he could try to get to it.

The storm lasted through the night. It washed away the shelter and the supplies. He clung to the log and the lashing around his waist cut into him in the night. Warren let the water wash freely over the cuts, the salt stinging across his back and over his belly, because it would heal faster that way. He tried to sleep. Toward dawn he dozed and woke only when he sensed a shift in the currents. The wind had backed into the northeast. Chop still washed across the deck and a third of the raft had broken away, but the sea was lessening as dawn came on. Warren woke slowly, not wanting to let go of the dreams.

There was nothing left but the

mast, some poles he had lashed to the center log, and his knife and arrow. From a pole and a meter of twine he made a gaff with the knife. The twine had frayed. It was slow work and the twine slipped in his raw fingers. The bark of the log had cut them in the night. The sun rose quickly and a heat came into the air that worked at the cuts in him and made them sweat. He could feel that the night had tired him and he knew he would have to get food to keep his head clear. The Skimmers would come to him again he knew and if there was a message he would have to understand it.

He made the knife fast to the pole with the twine but it was not strong and he did not want to risk using it unless he had to. A green patch of seaweed came nearby and he hooked it. He meant to use it for bait if he could but as he shook it out small shrimps fell to the planking. They jumped and kicked like sand fleas and without thinking Warren pinched off their heads with his fingernails and ate them. The shells and tails crunched in his teeth and filled his mouth with a salty moist tang.

He kept a few for bait even though they were small. The twine was too heavy for a good line but he used it as he had before, in the first days after the *Manamix* went down when he had tried with some of their food as bait and had never caught anything. He was a sailor but he did not know how to fish. He set three trailing lines and sat to wait, wishing he had the shelter to stop the sun. The current moved well now and the chop was down. Warren hefted the gaff and hoped for a Swarmer to come. He thought of them as moving appetites, senseless alone but dangerous if enough came at once and butted the raft.

He bent over and looked steadily at a ripple of water about twenty meters from the raft. Something moved. Shifting prisms of green light descended into the dark waters. He thought about a lure. With Rosa it had been simple, a movement to draw them in and a quick shot. Warren turned, looking for something to rig to coax with, and he saw the trailing line on the left straighten and then the line hissed and water jumped from it.

He reached to take some of the weight off and play in the line. It snapped. To the right something leaped from the water. The slim blue form whacked its tail noisily three times. Another sailed aloft on the other side of the raft as the first crashed back in a loud white splash. A third leaped and shone silver-blue in the sun and another and another and they were jumping to all sides at once, breaking free of the flat sea, their heads tilted sideways

to see the raft. Warren had never seen Skimmers in schools and the way they rippled the water with their quick rushes. They were not like the Swarmers in their grace and the way they glided in the air for longer than seemed right until you looked closely at the two aft tails that beat the water and gave the look of almost walking.

Warren stood and stared. The acrobatic swivel of the Skimmers at the peak of their arc was swift and deft, a dash of zest. Their markings ran downward toward the tail. There were purplings and then three fine white stripes that fanned into the aft tails. There was no hole in the gut like the place where the Swarmers spun out their strands. Warren guessed the smallest of them was three meters long. Bigger than most marlin or sharks. Their thin mouths parted at the top of the arc and sharp narrow teeth showed white against the slick blue skin.

It was easy to see why his clumsy fishing had never hooked any big fish. These creatures and the Swarmers had teeth for a reason. There were many of them in the oceans now and they had to feed on something.

They leaped and leaped and leaped again. Their forefins wriggled in flight. The fins separated into bony ridges at their edge and rippled quickly. Each ridge made a stubby projection. The rear fins were the same. They smacked the water powerfully and filled the air with so much spray that he could see a rainbow in one of the fine white clouds.

Just as suddenly they were gone.

Warren waited for them to return. After a while he licked his lips and sat down. He began to think of water without wanting to. He had to catch a Swarmer. He wondered if the Skimmers drove them away.

In the afternoon he saw a rippling to the east but it passed going north. The high hard glare of the sun weighed on him. Nothing tugged at his lines. The mast traced an ellipse in the sky as the waves came.

A white dab of light caught his eye. It was a blotch on the flat plane of the sea. It came steadily closer. He squinted.

Canvas. Under it was a blue form tugging at a corner. Warren hauled it aboard and the alien leaped high, showering him, the bony head slanted to bring one of the big elliptical white eyes toward the figure on the deck. The Skimmer plunged, leaped again, and swam away fast, taking short leaps. Warren studied the soggy bleached canvas. It looked like a tarp used to cover the gun emplacements on the *Manamix* but he could not be sure. There were copper-rimmed holes along one edge. He used them to hoist it up the mast, lashing it with wire and punch-

ing new holes to fasten the boom. He did not have enough lines to get it right but the canvas filled with the quickening breeze of late afternoon.

He watched the bulging canvas and patiently did not think about his thirst. A splash of spray startled him. A Skimmer—the same one?—was leaping next to the raft. He licked his swollen lips and thought for a moment of fetching the gaff and then put the idea away. He watched the Skimmer arc and plunge and then speed away. It went a few tens of meters and then leaped high and turned and came back. It splashed him and then left and did the same thing again. Warren frowned. The Skimmer was heading southwest. It cut a straight line in the shifting waters.

To keep that heading he would need a tiller. He tore up a plank at the raft edge and lashed a pole to it. Fashioning a collar that would seat in the deck was harder. He finally wrapped strips of bark firmly into a hole he had punched with the gaff. They held for a while and he had to keep replacing them. The tiller was weak and he could not turn it quickly for fear of breaking the lashing. It was impossible to perform any serious maneuver like coming about if the wind shifted, but the sunset breeze usually held steady and anyway he could haul down the canvas if the wind changed too much. He nodded. It would be enough.

He brought the bow around on the path the Skimmer was marking. The current tugged him sideways and he could feel it through the tiller but the raft steadied and began to make a gurgle where it swept against the drift. The canvas filled.

The clouds were fattening again and he hoped there would not be another storm. The raft was weaker. The boards creaked with the rise and fall of each wave. He would not last an hour if he had to cling to a log in the water. He could feel a heavy fatigue settle in him.

The sea was calming, going flat. He scratched his skin where the salt had caked and stung. He slitted his eyes and looked toward the sunset. Banks of clouds were reflected in the ocean that now at sunset was like a lake. Waves made the image of the clouds into stacked bars of light. Pale cloud, then three washes of blue, then rods of cloud again. The reflection made light seem bony, broken into beams and angles. Square custard wedges floated on the glassy skin. He looked up into the empty sky, above the orange ball of sun, and saw a thin streak of white. At first he tried to figure out how this illusion was made but there was nothing in optics that would give a line of light that stood up into the sky rather than lying in it. It was no jet or rocket trail.

After describing it to himself this way Warren knew what it had to be. The Skyhook. He had forgotten the project, had not heard it mentioned in years. He supposed they were still building it. The strand started far out in orbit and lowered toward the earth as men added to it. It would be more years before the tip touched the air and began the worst part of the job. If they could lower it through the miles of air and pin it to the ground, the thing would make a kind of elevator. People and machines would ride up it and into orbit and the rockets would not streak the sky any more. Warren had thought years ago about trying to get a job working on the Skyhook but he knew only how engines worked and they did not use any of that up there, nothing that needed air to burn. It was a fine thing where it caught the sun like a spider thread. He watched it until it turned red against the black and then faded as the night came on.

## IV.

He woke in the morning with the first glow of light. His left arm was crooked around the tiller to hold it even though he had moored it with a wire. The first thing he checked was the heading. It had drifted some and he sat up to correct it and then found that his left arm was cramped. He shook it. It would not loosen so he gave it a few minutes to come right while he unlashed the tiller and brought them around to the right bearing. He was pretty sure he knew the setting even though he could feel that the current had changed. The raft cut across the shallow waves more at this new angle. Foam broke over the deck and the swell was deeper, the planking groaned, but he held to it.

The left arm would not uncramp. The cold of the night and sleeping on it had done this. He hoped the warmth later would loosen the muscles though he knew it was probably because his body was not getting enough food or the right food. The arm would just have to come loose on its own. He massaged it. The muscles jumped under his right hand and after a while he could feel a tingling all down the arm although that was probably from rubbing the salt in, he knew.

There was nothing on his lines. He drew in the bait but it had been nibbled away. He kept himself busy gathering seaweed with the gaff and resetting the lines with the weed but he knew it was not much use and he was trying to keep his mind off the thirst. It had been bad since he woke up and was getting worse as the sun rose. He searched for the Skyhook to take his mind off his throat and the raw puffed-up feel in his mouth but he could not see it.

He checked the bearing

whenever he remembered it but there was a buzzing in his head that made it hard to tell how much time had passed. He thought about the Swarmers and how much he wanted one. The Skimmers were different but they had left him here now and he was not sure how much longer he could hold the bearing or even remember what the bearing was. The steady hollow slap of the waves against the underside of the raft soothed him and he closed his eyes against the sun.

He did not know how long he slept but when he woke his face burned and his left arm had come free. He lay there feeling it and noticed a new kind of buzzing. He looked around for an insect even though he had not seen any for many days and then cocked his head up and heard the sound coming out of the sky. Miles away a dot drifted across a cloud. The airplane was small and running on props, not jets. Warren got to his feet with effort and waved his arms. He was sure they would see him because there was nothing else in the sea and he would stick out if he could just keep standing. He waved and the plane kept going straight and he thought he could see under it something jumping in the water after its shadow had passed. Then the plane was a speck and he lost the sound of it and finally stopped waving his arms although it had not really come to him yet that they had not seen him. He sat down heavily. He was panting from the waving and then without noticing it for a while he began crying.

After a time he checked the bearing again, squinting at the sun and judging the current. He sat and watched and did not think.

The splash and thump startled him out of a fever dream.

The Skimmer darted away, plunging into a wave and out the other side with a turning twist of its aft fins.

A cylinder like the others rolled across the deck. He scrambled to catch it. The rolled sheet inside was ragged and uneven.

WAKTPL OGO SHIMA
WSW WSW CIRCLE ALAPMTO GUNJO
GEHEN WSW WSW
SCHLECT SCHLECT YOUTH UNSSTOP NONGO
LUCK LOTS

Now instead of NONGO there was OGO. Did they think this was the opposite? Again WSW and again CIRCLE. Another island? The misspelled SCHLECT, if that was what it was, and repeated. A warning? What point could there be in that when he had not seen a Swarmer in days? If UNS was the German *we*, then UNSSTOP might be *we stop*. The line might mean *bad youth we stop not go*. And it might not. But

GEHEN WSW WSW meant *go west south west* or else everything else made no sense at all and he had been wrong ever since the island. There was Japanese in it too but he had never crewed on a ship where it was spoken and he didn't know any. SHIMA. He remembered the city, Hiroshima, and wondered if *shima* was *town* or *river* or something geographical. He shook his head. The last line made him smile. The Skimmers must have been in contact with something well enough to know a salute at the end was a human gesture. Or was that what they meant? The cold thought struck him that this might be *goodbye*. Or, looking at it another way, that they were telling him he needed lots of luck. He shook his head again.

That night he dreamed about the eyes and blood and fin-fluid of the Swarmers, about swimming in it and dousing his head in it and about water that was clear and fresh. When he woke the sun was already high and hot. The sail billowed west. He got the heading close to what he could remember and then crawled into the shadow of the sail, as he had done the days before. He had kept his clothes on all the time on the raft and they were rags now. They kept off the sun still but were caked with salt and rubbed at the cuts and stung when he moved. At his neck and on his hands were black patches where the skin had peeled away and then burned again. He had worn a kind of hat he made before from Swarmer skin and bone and it was good shade but it had gone overboard in the storm.

Warren thought about the message but could make no more sense of it. He scratched his beard and found it had a crust of salt in it like hoarfrost. The salt was in his eyebrows too and he leaned over the side face-down in the water and scrubbed it away. He peered downward at the descending blades of green light and the dark shadow of the raft tapering away like a steep pyramid into the shifting murky darkness. He thought he saw something moving down there but he could not be sure.

He was getting weak now. He caught some more seaweed and used it as bait on the lines. The effort left him trembling. He set the heading and sat in the shade.

He woke with a jerk and there was splashing near the raft. Skimmers. They leaped into the noonday glare and beyond them was a brown haze. He blinked and it was an island. The wind had picked up and the canvas pulled full-bellied toward the land.

He sat numb and tired at the tiller and brought the raft in toward the island, running fast before the wind and cutting the waves and sending foam over the deck. There was a lagoon.

Surf broke on the coral reefs hooking around the island. The land looked to be about a kilometer across, wooded hills and glaring white beaches. The Skimmers moved off to the left and Warren saw a pale space in the lagoon that looked like a passage. He slammed the tiller over full and the raft yawed and bucked against the waves that were coming harder now. The deck groaned and the canvas luffed but the raft came into the pocket of the pale space and then the waves took it through powerfully and fast. Beyond the crashing of surf on the coral he sailed close to the wind to keep away from the dark blotches in the shallows and then turned toward shore. The Skimmers were gone now, but he did not notice until the raft snagged on a sand bar and he looked around, judging the distance to the beach. He was weak and it would be stupid to risk anything this close. He stood up with a grunt and jumped heavily on the free side of the raft. It slewed and then broke free of the sand bar and the wind blew it fifty meters more. He got his tools and stood on the raft, hesitating as if leaving it after all this time was hard to imagine and then he swore at himself and stepped off. He swam slowly until his feet hit sand and then took slow steps up to the beach, careful to keep his balance, so he did not see the man come out of the palms.

Warren pitched forward onto the sand and tried to get up. The sand felt hard and hot against him. He stood again with pains in his legs and the man was standing nearby, Chinese or maybe Filipino. He said something to Warren and Warren asked him a question and they stared at each other. Warren waited for an answer and when he saw there was not going to be one he held out his right hand, palm up. In the silence they shook hands.

V.

For a day he was weak and could not walk far. The Chinese brought him cold food in tin cans and coconut milk. They talked at each other but neither one knew a single word the other did, and soon they stopped. The Chinese pointed to himself and said "Gijan" or something close to it so Warren called him that.

It looked as though Gijan had drifted to the island in a small lifeboat. He wore clothes like gray pajamas and had two cases of canned food.

Warren slept deeply and woke to a distant booming. He stumbled down to the beach, looking around for Gijan. The Chinese was standing waist-deep in the lagoon and he pointed a pistol into the water and fired, making a loud bang but not kicking up much spray. Warren watched as

slim white fish floated up, stunned. Gijan picked them from the water and put them in a palm frond he carried. He came ashore smiling and held out one of the fish to Warren. Its eyes bulged.

"Raw?" Warren shook his head. But Gijan had no matches.

Warren pointed to the pistol. Gijan took the medium-caliber automatic and hefted it and looked at him. "No. I mean, give me a shell." He realized it was pointless talking. He made a gesture of things coming out of the muzzle and Gijan caught it and fished a cartridge out of his pockets. Gijan took the fish up on the sand as they started flopping in the palm frond, waking up from the stunning. Warren gathered dry brush and twigs and mixed them and dug a pit for the mixture with his hands. He still had his knife and some wire. He forced open the cartridge with them. He mixed the gunpowder with the wood. He had been watching Gijan the night before and the man was not using fire, just eating out of cans. Warren found some hardwood and rubbed the wire along it quickly while Gijan watched, frowning at first. The fish were dead and gleamed in the sun. Warren was damned if he was going to eat raw fish now that he was on land. He rubbed the wire harder, bracing the wood between his knees and drawing the wire quickly back and forth. He felt it get warm in his hands. When he was sweating and the wire was both burning and biting into his hands he knelt beside the wood and pressed the searing wire into it. The powder fizzled and sputtered for a moment and then with a rush it caught, the twigs snapped, and the fire made its own pale yellow glow in the sun. Gijan smiled.

Warren had felt a dislike of Gijan's using the gun to get the fish. He thought about it as he and Gijan roasted them on sticks, but the thought went away as he started eating them and the rich crisp flavor burst in his mouth. He ate four of them in a row without stopping to drink any of the coconut milk Gijan had in tin cans. The hunger came on him suddenly as if he had just remembered food and it did not go away until he finished six fish and ate half of the coconut meat. Then he thought again about using the gun that way but it did not seem so bad now.

Gijan tried to describe something by using his hands and drawing pictures in the sand. A ship, sinking. Gijan in a boat. The sun coming into the sky seven times. Then the island. Boat broken up on the coral, but Gijan swimming beside it and getting it to shore, half sunken.

Warren nodded and drew his own story. He did not show the Swarmers or the Skimmers ex-

cept at the shipwreck because he did not know how to tell the man what it was like and also he was not sure how Gijan would like the idea of eating Swarmer. Warren was not sure why this hesitation came into his head but he decided to stick with it and not tell Gijan too much about how he survived.

In the afternoon Warren made a hat for himself and walked around the island. It was flat most of the way near the beach with a steep outcropping of brown rock where the ridgeline of the island ran down into the sea. There were palms and scrub brush and sea grass and dry stream beds. He found a big rocky flat space on the southern flank of the island and squinted at it a while. Then he went back and brought Gijan to it and made gestures of picking out some of the pale rocks and carrying them. The man caught the idea on the second try. Warren scratched out SOS in the sand and showed it to him. Gijan frowned, puzzled. He made his own sign with a stick and Warren could not understand it. There were four lines like the outline of a house and a cross bar. Warren thumped the sand next to the SOS and said "Yes!" and thumped it again. He was pretty sure SOS was an international symbol but the other man simply stared at him. The silence got longer. There was tension in the air. Warren could not understand where it had come from. He did not move. After a moment Gijan shrugged and went off to collect more of the light-colored rocks.

They laid them out across the stony clearing, letters fifty meters tall. Warren suspected the airplane he had seen was searching for survivors of Gijan's ship, which had gone down nearby, and not the *Manamix*. It was funny Gijan had not thought of making a signal but then he did not think of making a fire either.

The next morning Warren drew pictures of fishing and found that Gijan had not tried it. Warren guessed the man was simply waiting to be picked up and was a little afraid of the big silent island and even more of the empty sea. Gijan's hands were softer than Warren's and he guessed maybe the man had been mainly a desk worker. When the canned food ran out Gijan would have tried fishing but not before. So far all he had done was climb a few palms and knock down coconuts. The palms were stunted here though and there was not much milk in the coconuts. They would need water.

Warren worked the metal in the leftover cans and made fishhooks. Gijan saw what he was doing and went away into the north part of the island.

Warren was surveying the lagoon, looking for deep spots

near the shore, when he found the raft moored in a narrow cove. Gijan must have found it drifting and tied it there. The boards looked worn and weak and the whole thing—cracked tiller, bleached canvas, rusted wire lashings—carried the feel of an old useless wreck. Warren studied it for a while and then turned away.

Gijan found him at a rough shelf of rock that stuck out over the lagoon. Gijan was carrying a box Warren had not seen. He put the box down and gestured to it, smiling slightly, proud. Warren looked inside. There was a tangle of fishing line inside, some hooks, a rod, a diving mask, fins, a manual in Chinese or something like it, a screwdriver, and some odds and ends. Warren looked at the man and wished he knew how to ask a question. The box was the same kind that the canned food was in, so Warren guessed Gijan had brought all this in the boat.

They went down to the beach and Gijan drew some more pictures and that was the story that came out of it. He did not draw anything about hiding the box away but Warren could guess that he had. Gijan must have seen the raft coming and in a hurry, afraid, he would snatch up what he could and hide it. Then when he saw that Warren was no trouble he came out and brought the food. He left the rest behind just to be careful. He was still being careful when he used the pistol to fish. Maybe that was a way to show Warren he had it without making any threats.

Warren smiled broadly and shook his hand and insisted on carrying the box back to their camp. Land crabs skittered away from their feet as they walked, two men with a strange silence between them.

Warren fished in the afternoon. The canned goods would not last long with two of them eating and Warren was more hungry than he could ever remember. His body was waking up after being half dead and it wanted food and water, more water than they could get out of the coconuts. He would have to do something about that. He thought about it while he fished, using worms from the shady parts of the island, and then he saw moving shadows in the lagoon. They were big fish but they twisted on their turns in a way he remembered. He watched and they did not break water but he was sure.

He began to notice the thirst again after he had caught two fish. He left a line with bait and went inland and knocked down three coconuts but they did not yield much of the sweet milk. He took the fish back to camp where Gijan was keeping the fire going. Warren sat and watched him gut the fish, not

making a good job of it. He felt the way he had in the first days on the raft. New facts, new problems. This island was just a bigger raft with more to take from but you had to learn the ways first.

Gijan's odd box of equipment had some rubber hose that had sheared off some missing piece of equipment. Warren stared at the collection in the box for a while. He began idly making a cover for one of the large tin cans, fitting pieces of metal together. Crimping them over the lip of the can and around the edge of the hose he found that they made a pretty fair seal. He made a holder for the can, working patiently. Gijan watched him with interest. Warren sent him to get sea water in a big can. He rigged the hose to pass through a series of smaller cans. With the sea water he filled the big can and sealed the tight cover and put it on the fire. The men watched the water boil and then steam came out of the hose. Gijan saw the idea and put sea water into the small cans. It cooled the hose so that in the end the thin steam faded into a dribble of fresh water. They smiled at each other and watched the slow drip. By late afternoon they had their first drink. It was brackish but not bad.

Warren used gestures and sketches in the sand to ask Gijan about the assortment of equipment. Had he been on a research vessel? A fast skimship?

Gijan drew the profile of an ordinary freighter, even adding the loading booms. Gijan pointed at Warren so he drew an outline of the *Manamix*. With pantomime and gestures and imitating sounds they got across their trades. Warren worked with machines and Gijan was some kind of trader. Gijan drew a lopsided map of the Pacific and pointed to a speck not big enough or in the right place to be any island Warren knew about. Gijan sketched in nets and motor boats and Warren guessed they had been using a freighter to try for tuna. It sounded stupid. Until now he had not thought about the islands isolated for years now and how they would get food. You could not support a population by fishing from the shore. Most crops were thin in the sandy soil. So he guessed Gijan's island had armored a freighter and sent it out with nets, desperate. If it was a big enough island they might have an airplane and some fuel left and maybe that was the one he saw.

Gijan showed him the stuff in the box again. It was pretty banged up and salt-rusted and Warren guessed it had been left years ago when the freighter was still working. In the years when the Swarmers were spreading Warren had had a gun like everybody else in the crew, not in his own duffle

where somebody might find it, but in a locker of spare engine parts. Now that he thought about it a lifeboat was a better place to stow a weapon, down in with some old gear nobody would want. When you needed a gun you would be on deck already and you could get to it easy.

He looked at Gijan's pinched face and tried to read it but the man's eyes were blank, just watching with a puzzled frown. It was hard to tell what Gijan meant by some of his drawings and Warren got tired of the whole thing.

They ate coconuts at sundown. The green ones were like jelly inside. Gijan had a way of opening them using a stake wedged into the hardpacked ground. The stake was sharp and Gijan slammed the coconut down on it until the green husk split away. The hard-shelled ones had the tough white meat inside but not much milk. The palms were bent over in the trade winds and were short. Warren counted them up and down the beach and estimated how long the two men would take to strip the island. Less than a month.

Afterward Warren went down to the beach and waded out. A current tugged at his ankles and he followed with his eyes the crinkling of the pale water where a deep current ran. It swept around the island toward the passage in the coral, the basin of the lagoon pouring out into the ocean under the night tide. Combers snarled white against the dark wedge of the coral ring and beyond was the jagged black horizon.

They would have to get fish from the lagoon and lines from shore would not be enough. But that was only one of the reasons to go out again.

In the dim moonlight he went back, past the fire where Gijan sat watching the hissing distiller and then into the scrub. Uphill he found a tree and stripped bark from it. He cut it into chips and mashed them on a rock. He was tired by the time he got a sour-smelling soup going on the fire. Gijan watched. Warren did not feel like trying to tell the man what he was doing. Warren tended the simmering and fell asleep and woke when Gijan bent over him to taste the can's thick mash. Gijan made a face. Warren roughly yanked the can away, burning his own fingers. He shook his head abruptly and set the can where it would come to a rolling boil. Gijan moved off. Warren ignored him and fell back into sleep.

This night mosquitoes found them. Warren woke and slapped his forehead and each time in the fading orange firelight his hand was covered by a mass of squashed red-brown. Gijan grunted and complained. Towards morning they trudged back into the scrub and the mosquitoes left them and they curled

up on the ground to sleep until the sun came through the canopy of fronds above.

The lines he had left overnight were empty. The fishing was bound to be bad when you had no chance to play the line. They had more coconuts for breakfast and Warren checked the cooling mash he had made. It was thick and it stained wood a deep black. He put it aside without thinking much about how he could use it.

In the cool of the morning he repaired the raft. The slow working of the tide had loosened the lashings and some of the boards were rotting. It would do for the lagoon, but as he worked he thought of the Swarmers crawling ashore at the last island. The big things had been slow and clumsy and with Gijan's pistol the men would have an advantage, but there were only two of them. They could not cover the whole island. If the Swarmers came the raft might be the only escape they had.

He brought the fishing gear aboard and cast off. Gijan saw him and came running down the hard white sand. Warren waved. Gijan was excited and jabbering and his eyes rolled back and forth from Warren to the break in the reef. He pulled out his pistol and waved it in the air. Warren ran up the worn canvas sail and swung the boom around so that the raft peeled away from the passage and made headway along the beach, around the island. When he looked back Gijan was aiming the pistol at him. Warren frowned. He could not understand the man but after a moment when Gijan saw that he was running steady in the lagoon the pistol came down. Warren saw the man put the thing back in his pocket and then he set to work laying his lines. He kept enough wind in the sail to straighten the pull and move the bait so it would look like it was swimming.

Maybe he should have drawn a sketch for Gijan. Warren thought about it a moment and then shrugged. An aft line jerked as something hit it and Warren forgot Gijan and his pistol and played in the catch.

He took four big fish in the morning. One had the striped back and silvery belly of a bonito and the others he did not recognize. He and Gijan ate two and stripped and salted the others and in the afternoon he went out again. Standing on the raft he could see the shadows of the big fish as they came into the lagoon. A Skimmer darted in the distance and he stayed away from it, afraid it would come for the trailing lines. After a while he remembered that they had never hit the lines in the ocean so he did not veer the raft when the Skimmer leaped high nearby, rolling over in that strange way.

Gijan was standing on the glaring white beach, he noticed, watching. Another leap, splashing foam, and then a tube rattled on the boards of the raft.

SHIMA STONES CROSSING SAFE YOUTH
WORLD NEST UNSSPRACHEN SHIGANO YOU SPRACHEN
YOUTH UMI HIRO SAFE NAGARE CIRCLE UNS SHIO
WAIT WAIT YOU LUCK

Warren came ashore with it and Gijan reached for the slick sheet. The man moved suddenly and Warren stepped back, bracing himself. The two stood still for a moment looking at each other, Gijan's face compressed and intent. Then in a controlled way Gijan relaxed, making a careless gesture with his hands, and helped moor the raft. Warren moved the tube and sheet from one hand to the other and finally, feeling awkward, handed them to Gijan. The man read the words slowly, lips pressed together. "Shima," he said. "Shio. Nagare. Umi." He shook his head and looked at Warren, his lips forming the words again silently.

They drew pictures in the sand. For *shima* Gijan sketched the island and for *umi* the sea around it. In the lagoon he drew wavy lines in the water and said several times, "Nagare." Across the island he drew a line and then made swooping motions of bigness and said, "Hiro."

Warren murmured, "Wide island? Hiro shima?" but aside from blinking Gijan gave no sign that he understood. Warren showed him a rock for *stone* and drew the Earth for *world* but he was not sure if that was what the words on the sheet meant jammed in with the others. What did the dark W of *world* mean?

The men spoke haltingly to each other over the booming of the reef. The clusters of words would not yield to a sensible plan and even if it had, Warren was not sure he could tell Gijan his part of it, the English smattering of words, or that Gijan could get across to him the foreign ones. He felt in Gijan a restless energy now, an impatience with the crabbed jumble of language. *Wait wait you* and then *luck*. It seemed to Warren he had been waiting a long time now and even though this message had more English and was clearer there was no way for the Skimmers to know what language Warren understood, not unless he told them. Frowning over a diagram Gijan was drawing in the floury sand, he saw suddenly why he had made the bark mash last night.

It took hours to write a message on the back of the sheet. A bamboo quill stabbed the surface and if you held it right it did not puncture. The sour black ink dripped and ran but by pinning the sheet flat in the sun he

got it to dry without a lot of blurring.

SPEAK ENGLISH. WILL YOUTH COME HERE? ARE WE SAFE FROM YOUTH ON ISLAND? SHIMA IS ISLAND IN ENGLISH. WHERE ARE YOU FROM? CAN WE HELP YOU? WE ARE FRIENDLY.

LUCK

Gijan could not understand any of it or at least he gave no sign. Warren took the raft out again at dusk as the wind backed into the north and ebbed into fitful breezes. The sail luffed and he had trouble bringing the raft out of the running lagoon currents and toward the spot where flickering shadows played on the white expanse of a sand bar. A Skimmer leaped and turned as he came near. He held the boom to catch the last gusts of sunset wind and when the shadows were under the raft he threw the tube into the water. It bobbed and began to drift out toward the passage to the sea as Warren waited, watching the shadows, wondering if they had seen it, knowing he could not catch the tube now with the raft before it reached the reef, and then a quick flurry of motion below churned the pale sand and a form came up, turning, then ripping the smooth water as it leaped. The Skimmer flexed in air and hung for an instant, rolling, before it fell with a smack and was gone in an upwash of bright foam. The tube was gone.

That night the mosquitoes came again and drove them onto the rocky ground near the center of the island. In the morning their hands were blood-streaked where they had slapped their faces and legs in the night and caught the fat mosquitoes partway through the feeding.

In the morning Warren went out again and laid his lines as early as possible. Near the sand bar there were many fish. One of them hit a line and when Warren pulled it in the thing had deep-set eyes, a small mouth like a parrot's beak, slimy gills and hard blue scales. He pressed at the flesh and a dent stayed in it for a while, the way it did if you squeezed the legs of a man with leprosy or dropsy. The thing smelled bad as it lay on the planks and the sun warmed it so he threw it back, pretty sure it was poisonous. It floated and a Skimmer leaped near it and then took the thing and was gone. Warren could see more Skimmers moving below. They were feeding on the poison fish.

He caught two skipjack tuna and brought them ashore for Gijan to clean. The man was watching him steadily from the beach and Warren did not like it. The thing between him and the Skimmers was his and he did not want any more of the stupid drawing and hand-waving of trying to explain it to Gijan.

He went into the palm grove where the fire crackled and got the diving mask he had seen in Gijan's box. It was made for a smaller head but with the rubber strap drawn tight he could ride it up against the bridge of his nose and make it fit. As he came back down to the beach, Gijan said something but Warren went on to the raft and cast off, bearing in the southerly wind out toward the sand bar. He grounded the raft on the bar to hold it steady.

He lay on the raft and peered down at the moving shapes. They were at least twenty fathoms down and they had finished off the poison fish. Seven Skimmers hovered over a dark patch, rippling their forefins where the bony ridges stuck out like thick fingers. Sunlight caught a glint from the thing they were working on and suddenly a gout of gray mist came up from it and broke into bubbles. It was steam. He lay halfway over the side of the raft and watched the regular puffs of steam billow up from the machine. Without thinking of the danger he slipped overboard and dove, swimming hard, pushing as deep as he could despite the tightness and burning in his chest. The Skimmers moved as they saw him and the machine became clearer. It was like a pile of junk, pieces of a ship's hull and deck collars and fittings of all sizes. Four batteries were mounted on one side and rust-caked cables led from them into the machine. There were other fragments and bits of worked metal and some of it he was sure had not been made by men. Knobs of something yellow grew here and there and in the wavering, rippling green light there was something about the form and shape of the thing that Warren recognized as right and yet he knew he had never seen anything like it before. There is a logic to a piece of equipment that comes out of the job it has to do and he felt that this machine was well shaped. Then his lungs at last burned too much and he fought upward, all thought leaving him as he let the air burst from him and followed the silvery bubbles up toward the shifting slanting blades of yellow-green sun.

## VI.

In the lagoon the water shaded from pale blue at the beach to emerald in the deep channel where the currents ran with the tides. Beyond the snarling reef the sea was a hard gray.

Warren worked for five days in the slow dark waters near the sand bar. He double-anchored the raft so the deck was steady and he could write well on it with the bark mash and then dry the sheets the Skimmers brought up to him.

Their first reply was not much better than the earlier messages

but he printed out in capital letters a simple answer and gradually they learned what he could not follow. Their next message had more English in it and less Japanese and German and fewer of the odd words made up out of parts of languages. There were longer stretches in it, too, more like sentences now than strings of nouns.

The Skimmers did not seem to think of things acting but instead of things just being, so they put down names of objects in long rows as though the things named would react on each other, each making the other clearer and more specific and what the things did would be obvious because of the relations between them. It was a hard way to learn to think and Warren was not sure he knew what the impacted knots of words meant most of the time. Sometimes the chains of words said nothing to him and the blue forms below would flick across the bone-white sand in elaborate looping arabesques, turning over and over with their ventral fins flared, in designs that escaped him. When the sun was low at morning or at dusk he could not tell the Skimmers from their shadows and the gliding long forms merged with their dark echoes on the sand in a kind of slow elliptical dance. He lay halfway off the raft and watched them when he was tired from the messages, and peered through the mask, and something in their quick darting glide would come through to him. He would try then to ask a simple question. He would write it out and dry it and throw it into the lagoon. Sometimes that was enough to cut through the jammed lines of endless nouns they had offered him and he would see a small thought that hung between the words in a space each word allowed but did not define. It was as if the words packed together still left a hole between them and the job was to see the hole instead of the blurred lumpy things that made the edges of the hole. That was a part of what it was like to think about the long strings of letters and to watch the skimming grace they had down in the dusky emerald green. There was more to it than that but he could not sort it out.

He went ashore at dusk each day. The catch from the trailing lines was good in the morning and went away in the afternoon. Maybe it had something to do with the Skimmers. The easy morning catch left him most of the day to study the many sheets they brought up to him and to work on his own halting answers.

Gijan stood on the beach most of the day and watched. He did not show the pistol again when Warren went out. He kept the fire and the distiller going and they ate well. Warren brought

the finished sheets ashore and kept them in Gijan's box but he could not tell the man much of what was in them, at first because lines in the sand and gestures were not enough and later because Warren did not know himself how to tell it.

Gijan did not seem to mind not knowing. He tended the fire and knocked down coconuts and split them and gutted the catch and after a while asked nothing more. At times he would leave the beach for hours and Warren guessed he was collecting wood or some of the pungent edible leaves they had at supper.

To Warren the knowing was all there was and he was glad Gijan would do the work and not bother him. At noon beneath the high hard dazzle of the sky he ate little because he wanted to keep his head clear. At night though he filled himself with the hot moist fish and tin-flavored water. He woke to a biting early sun. The mosquitoes still stung but he did not mind it so much now.

On the third day like this he began to write down for himself a kind of patchwork of what he thought they meant. He knew as soon as he read it over that it was not right. He had never been any good with words. When he was married he did not write letters to his wife when he shipped out even if he was gone half a year. But this writing was a way of getting it down and he liked the act of scratching out the blunt lines on the backs of the Skimmer sheets.

*In the long times before, the early forms went easy in the* **World**, *then rose up leaping out of the bottom of the* **World**, *to the land, made the tools we knew, struck the fire, made the fire-hardened sand we could see through so that we could cup the light. The clouds open, we can see lights, learn the dots above, we see lights we cannot reach, even the highest jumper of us cannot touch the lights that move. We cup the light, scoop it up, and find the lights in the sky are small and hot, but there is one light that we cup to us and find it is a stone in the sky, we think other lights are stones in sky but far away, we see no other place like the* **World**, *we swim at the bottom of everything, in the* **World**, *the place where stones want to fall, but the flow takes the stones in the sky, makes them circle us, circle forever like the hunters in the* **World** *before they close for the killing, so the stones cannot strike us in the nest of us, the* **World** *of the people. We thought that ours was the only* **World** *and that all else was cold stone or burning stone. And as we cupped the light not thinking of it we saw the cold stone in the sky grow a light which went on, then off, then*

*on, again and again, moving now strangely in the sky and then growing more stones, moving, stones falling into the* **World**, *stones smaller than the big sky stone, hitting killing bringing big animals that stink, eating every piece of the* **World** *that comes before them, taking some of us in them, big stones making big animals that are not alive but swallow, keeping us in them in water, sour water that brings pain, we live there, light coming from land that is not land, a* **World** *that is not the* **World**, *no waves no land but there is the glowing stone on all sides that we cannot climb, no land for the youth to crawl to, long time passing, we sing over and over the soon-birthing but it does not come, the song does not make it stir out of this red* **World**, *this small* **World** *that one of us can cross in the time of a single singing. The youth change their song slowly then more and then more, their song goes away from us, they sing strangely but do not crawl, hot red things bubble in the small* **World** *where we live and the youth drink it. The smooth stone on all sides makes this* **World** *glow with light that never grows and never dims, we keep some of our tools and can feel the time going, many songs pass, we do not let the youth sing or crawl but then they do not know us and sing their own noise, drinking in the foul currents of the big animal we inhabit, the smooth stone oozing light, always rumbling, the currents not right, we move thickly, lose our tides, the red currents suck and bring food sweet and bitter, wrong, through long times the walls humming and no waves for us to fly through and splash white. Then the smooth stone grows slowly hot, cracks open, some of us die, the song dims among us, bitter blue currents drive us down, more of us fall from the song, long cold sounds stab us, and more fall, from the sour streams come now waves, fresh streams, we taste, sing weakly, speak, it is a* **World** *like the one* **World**, *the smooth stone on all sides is gone, we break water. There are waves cutting white, sharp, we find salt foods, leap into hot airs, waves hard fast, we cup the light and see big stone in sky, far stones moving across the many stones, like our* **World** *but not of our* **World**. *The song is weak, we seek to cross this* **World** *but cannot, we know we will lose ourselves in this* **World** *if our song is stretched farther. But the youth have a strange song and they go out. They find food, they find big animals in the waves and bigger animals that crush the waves, they strike at them in the way we once did long times past, throw their webs to bring down the crushers of waves. These crushers are not the big*

*animals we knew in the* **W***orld and when the youth drag them down closer to the center they are not ripe, do not burst with fruit, are fiery to the mouth and kill some youth without releasing the pods that would drive the youth to the land, drive them to the air to suck, drive the change to make the youth into the form that would be us. These things that float and crush the waves we fear and flee but the youth eat of them and yet do not go to the land to crawl, we lose the song with them forever, they fly the waves no more, they take the big animals that walk above the waves, the youth have become able to kill the bitter wave-walkers, they feast on the things in them. We see from a distance that it is you the youth eat, even if you are sick and death-causing, you are killed in the skins that carry you walking the waves. The youth do not sing, they split your skins, they grow and eat all that comes before them. Now you are gone like us, nearly chewed. We come to here, we drive the youth away, the act chews us but does not finish us. We find you in the skins you love and we cannot sing with you. We find you one and in one you can sing, together you are deaf. You are the twenty-fourth we have sung with on the waves. Your kind cannot hear unless you are one and cannot sing to each other but many of the others who sang with us are now chewed but we can keep the youth away for a time we grow weak the youth run with sores and leave stink in the currents foul where they go we smell them the* **W***orld that was false* **W***orld made them this way not as they were when we knew them in the* **W***orld that was ours. They can not sing but know of the places where you sing to each other and some now go there with their sores they may be chewed by you but there are many many of them they ache now for the skins-that-sink but they are madness they are coming and they chew you others last.*

Each night after it got too dark for Warren to write in the yellow firelight they would move inland. The mosquitoes stayed near the beach and there were a lot of other insects, too. Warren listened to fish in the lagoon leaping for the insects and the splashing as the Skimmers took the fish in turn. He could see their phosphorescent wakes in the water.

They smeared themselves with mud to keep off the mosquitoes but it did not keep off the ticks that dropped from the trees. There was no iodine in Gijan's box of random items. Putting a drop of iodine on the tick's tail was the best treatment and second best was burning them off. Each morning the men in-

spected each other and there were always a few black dots where the ticks burrowed in. An ember from the fire pressed against the tick's hindquarters made it let go and then Warren could pull the tick out with his fingernails. He knew that if the head came off in the skin it would rot and the whole area would become a boil. He noticed that Gijan got few ticks and he wondered if it had anything to do with the oriental skin.

The next morning he got a good catch and when he brought it in he was sore from the days of work on the raft. After eating the fish he went for more coconuts. The softer fronds were good too for rubbing the skin to take away the sting of mosquito bites and to get the salt out. Finding good coconuts was harder now and he worked his way across the island, up the ridgeline and down to a swampy part on the southern side. There were edible leaves there and he chewed some slowly as he made his way back, thinking. He was nearly across a bare stretch of soil when he saw it was the place they had laid out the SOS. The light-colored rocks were there but they were scattered. The SOS was broken up.

Gijan was looking in the storage box when Warren came back into the camp. "Hey!" he called. Gijan looked at him, calm and steady, and then stood up, taking his time.

Warren pointed back to the south and glared at the man and then bent down and drew the SOS in the sand. He rubbed it out and pointed at Gijan.

Warren had expected the man to give him a blank look or a puzzled expression. Instead, Gijan put a hand in a pocket.

Then Gijan said quite clearly, "It does not matter."

Warren stood absolutely still. Gijan pulled the pistol casually out of his pocket but he did not aim it at anything.

Warren said carefully, "Why?"

"Why deceive you? So that you would go on with your—" he paused— "your good work. You have made remarkable progress."

"The Skimmers."

"Yes."

"And the SOS . . ."

"I did not want anyone to spot the island who should not."

"Who would that be?"

"Several. The Japanese. The Americans. There are reports of Soviet interest."

"So you are—"

"Chinese, of course."

"Of course."

"I would like to know how you wrote that summary. I read the direct messages you got from them, read them many times. I could not see in them very much."

"There's more to it than what they wrote."

"You are sure that you brought

all their messages ashore?"

"Sure. I kept them all."

"How do you discover things that are not in the messages?"

"I don't think I can tell you that."

"Cannot? Or will not?"

"Can't."

Gijan became pensive, studying Warren. Finally he said, "I cannot pass judgment on that. Others will have to decide that, others who know more than I do." He paused. "Were you truly in a shipwreck?"

"Yeah."

"Remarkable that you survived. I thought you would die when I saw you first. You are a sailor?"

"Engine man. What're you?"

"Soldier. A kind of soldier."

"Funny kind, seems to me."

"This is not the duty I would have chosen. I sit on this terrible place and try to talk to those things."

"Uh huh. Any luck?"

"Nothing. They do not answer me. The tools I was given do not work. Kinds of flashlights. Sound makers. Things floating in the water. I was told they are drawn to these things."

"What would happen if they did answer?"

"My job is over then."

"Well, I guess I've put you out of work. We're still going to need something to eat, though." He gestured at the raft and turned toward it and Gijan leveled the pistol.

"You can rest," the man said. "It will not be long."

## VII.

In mid-afternoon six deltaplanes came in low, made a pass and arced up, one at a time, to land in V-mode. They came down in the rocky area to the south and a few minutes after the shrieking engines shut down three squads of fast, lean-looking infantry came double-timing onto the beach.

Warren watched them from the shade where he sat within clear view of Gijan. The man had made him carry the radio and power supply from its concealment in the scrub and onto the beach, where he could talk down the planes. Gijan shouted at the men and they backed away from the beach where the Skimmers might see them. A squad took Warren and marched him south, saying nothing. At the landing site men and forklifts were unloading and building and no one looked at him twice. The squad took him to a small building set down on rocky soil and locked him inside.

It was light durablock construction, three meters square with three windows with heavy wire mesh over them. There was a squat wooden chair, a thin sleeping pad on the floor, and a fifty-watt glow plate in the ceiling that did not work. Warren tasted the water in a gallon jug

and found it tepid and metallic. There was a bucket to use as a toilet.

He could not see much through the windows but the clang and rumble of unloading went on. Darkness came. A motor started up nearby and he tried to tell if it was going or coming until he realized it was turning over at a steady rpm. He touched the wall switch and the soft glow above came on so he guessed the generator had started. In the dim light everything in the room stood out bleak and cold.

Later a muscular soldier came with a tin plate of vegetable stew. Warren ate it slowly, tasting the boiled onions and carrots and spinach and tomatoes, holding back his sudden appetite so that he got each taste separately. He licked the pan clean and drank some water and rather than sit and think fruitlessly he laid down and slept.

At dawn the same guard came again with more of the stew, cold this time. Warren had not finished it when the guard came back and took it away and yanked him to his feet. The soldier quick-marched him across a compound in the pale morning light. He memorized the sizes and distances of the buildings as well as he could. The guard took him to the biggest building in the compound, a prefab that was camouflage-speckled for the jungle. The front room was an office with Gijan sitting in one of the four flimsy chairs and a tall man, Chinese or Japanese, standing beside a plywood desk.

"You know Underofficer Gijan? Good. Sit." The tall man moved quickly to offer Warren a chair. He turned and sat behind the desk and Warren watched him. Each motion of the man had a kind of sliding quality to it, as though he was keeping his body centered and balanced at all times to take a new angle of defense or attack if needed.

"Please relax," the man said. Warren noticed that he was sitting on the edge of the chair. He settled back in it, using the moment to locate the guard in a far corner to his right, an unreachable two meters away.

"What is your name?"

"Warren."

"You have only one name?" the man asked, smiling.

"Your men didn't introduce themselves either. I didn't think I had to be formal."

"I am sure you understand the circumstances, Warren. In any case, my name is Tseng Wong. Since we are using only single names, call me Tseng." His words came out separately like smooth round objects forming in the still air.

"I can see that conditions have been hard on you."

"Not so bad."

Tseng pursed his lips. "The

evidence given by your little—" he searched for the word—"spasm in the face, is enough to show me—"

"What spasm?"

"Perhaps you do not notice it any longer. The left side, a tightening in the eyes and the mouth."

"I don't have anything like that."

Tseng looked at Gijan, just a quick glance, and then back at Warren. There was something in it Warren did not like and he found himself focusing his attention on his own face, waiting to see if there was anything wrong with it he had not noticed. Maybe he—

"Well, we shall let it pass. A casual remark, that is all. I did not come to criticize you but to, first, ask for your help, and second, to get you off this terrible island."

"You coulda got me off here days ago. Gijan had the radio."

"His task came first. You are fascinated by the same problem, are you, Warren?"

"Seems to me my big problem is you people."

"I believe your long exposure out here has distorted your judgment, Warren. I also believe you overestimate your ability to survive for long on this island. With Underofficer Gijan the two of you did well enough but in the long run I—" Tseng stopped when he saw the slight upward turn of Warren's mouth that was clearly a look of disdain.

"I saw that case of rations Gijan had stashed back in the brush," Warren said. "None of you know nothing about living out here."

Tseng stood up, tall and straight, and leaned against the back wall of the office. It gave him a more casual look but put him so that Warren had to look up to talk to him.

"I will do you the courtesy of speaking frankly. My government—and several others, we believe—has suspected for some time that there are two distinct populations among the aliens. One—the Swarmers—is capable of mass actions, almost instinctive actions, which are quite effective against ships. The others, the Skimmers, are far more intelligent. They are also verbal. Yet they did not respond to our research vessels. They ignored attempts to communicate."

Warren said, "You still have ships?"

For the first time Gijan spoke. "No. I was on one of the last that went down. They got us off with helicopters, and then—"

"No need to go into that," Tseng cut him off smoothly.

"It was the Swarmers who sank you. Not Skimmers," Warren said. It was not a question.

"Skimmer intelligence was really only an hypothesis," Tseng said, "until we had reports that they had sought out single men

or women. Usually people adrift, though sometimes even at the shore."

"Safer for them," Warren said.

"Apparently. They avoid the Swarmers. They avoid ships. Isolated contact is all that is left to them. It was really quite stupid of us not to have thought of that earlier."

"Yeah."

Tseng smiled slightly. "Everything is of course clearer in, as you say, the rearview mirror."

"Uh huh."

"It seems they learned the bits of German and Japanese and English from different individual encounters. The words were passed among the Skimmers so that each new contact had more available vocabulary."

"But they didn't know the words were from different languages," Gijan added.

"Maybe they only got one," Warren said.

"So we gather," Tseng said. "I have read your, ah, summary. Yours is the most advanced contact so far."

"A lot of it doesn't make much sense," Warren said. He knew Tseng was drawing him into the conversation but it did not matter. Tseng would have to give information to get some.

"The earlier contacts confirm part of your summary."

"Uh huh."

"They said that Swarmers can go ashore."

"Uh huh."

"How do you know that?"

"It's in the stuff I wrote. The stuff Gijan stole."

Gijan said sharply, "You showed it to me."

Warren looked at him without expression and Gijan stared back and after a moment looked away.

"Let us not bother with that. We are all working on the same problem, after all."

"Okay," Warren said. He had managed to get the talk away from how he knew about the Swarmers going on the land. Tseng was good at talking, a lot better than Warren, so he would have to keep the man away from some things. He volunteered, "I guess going up on the shore is part of their, uh, evolution."

"You mean their development?"

"They said something, the last day I saw them, about a deathlight. A deathlight coming on the land and only the Swarmers could live through it."

"Light from their star?"

"Guess so. It comes sometimes and that's why the Skimmers don't go up onto the land."

Tseng stood and began pacing against the back wall. Warren wondered if he knew that Swarmers had already gone inland on an island near here. Tseng gave no sign of it and said out of his concentration, "That agrees with the earlier survivors' reports. We think that means their star is irregular. It

flares in the UV. The Swarmers have simple nervous systems, smaller brains. They can survive a high UV flux."

"For about two of their planet's years, the Skimmers said," Warren murmured. "But you're wrong—the Swarmers aren't dumb."

"They have heads of mostly bone."

"That's for killing the big animals, the ones that float on the surface of their sea. Something like whales, I guess. Maybe they stay at the top to use the UV or something."

"The Swarmers ram them, throw those webs over them? Sink them?"

"Yeah. Just what they did to our ships."

"Target confusion. They think ships are animals."

"The Swarmers, they drag the floaters under, eat some kind of pods inside 'em. That's what triggers their going up on the land."

"If we could find a way to prevent their confusing our ships with—"

Gijan said, "But they are going to the land now. They are in the next mode."

"Uh huh." Warren studied the two men, tried to guess if they knew anything he could use. "Look, what're they doing when they get ashore?"

Tseng looked at him sharply. "What do the Skimmers say?"

"Far as I can tell, the Swarmers aren't dumb, not once they get on land. They make the machines and stuff for the Skimmers. They're really the same kind of animal. They grow hands and feet and the Skimmers have some way to tell them —singing—how to build stuff, make batteries, tools, that stuff."

Tseng stared at Warren for a long moment. "A break in the evolutionary ladder? Life trying to get out of the oceans, but turned back by the solar flares?" Tseng leaned forward and rested his knuckles on the gray plywood. He had a strange weight and force about him. And a desperate need.

Warren said, "Maybe it started out with the Swarmers crawling up on the beaches to lay eggs or something. Good odds they'd be back in the water before a flare came. Then the Skimmers invented tools and saw they needed things on the land, needed to make fire or something. So they got the Swarmers, the younger form of their species, to help. Maybe—"

"The high UV speeded up their evolutionary rate. Perhaps the Swarmers became more intelligent, in their last phase, on land, where the intelligence would be useful in making the tools. Um, yes."

Tseng gave Gijan an intense glance. "Possible. But I think there is more than that. These creatures are here for some purpose beyond this charming little

piece of natural history we have been told. Or sold."

Tseng turned back to Warren. "We have our partially successful procedures of communication, as you have probably guessed. I have been ordered to carry out systematic methods of approach." He was brisk and sure, as though he had digested Warren's information and found a way to classify it. "Yours will be among them. But it is an idiosyncratic technique and I doubt we could teach it to our field men. Underofficer Gijan, for example." The contempt in his voice for Gijan was obvious. "Meanwhile, I will call upon you for help if we need it, Warren."

"Uh huh."

Tseng took a map of the ocean from his desk drawer and flipped it across to Warren. "I trust this will be of help in writing your report."

"Report?"

"An account of your interactions with the aliens. I must file it with my superior. I am sure it will be in your own interests to make it as accurate as possible." He made a smile without any emotion behind it. "If you can fix the point where your ship went down, we might even be able to find some other survivors."

Warren could see there was nothing in this last promise. He thought and then said, "Mr. Wong, I wondered if I could, you know, rest a little. And when the guard there brings me my food, I'd like a long time to eat it. My stomach, being out on the ocean so long, it can't take your food unless I kind of take it easy."

"Of course, of course." Tseng smiled with genuine emotion this time. Warren could see that he was glad to be dispensing favors and that the act made him sure he had judged the situation and had it right.

"Sure do appreciate that, Mr. Wong," he said, getting the right tone into the words so that the man would classify him and file him away and forget him.

## VIII.

He worked for two days on the report. The guard gave him a pad of paper and a short stubby little pen and Tseng told him to write it in English. Warren smiled at that. They thought any seaman had to speak a couple of languages but he had never had any trouble getting around with one and a few words picked up from others. You learned more from watching people than from listening to all their talk anyway.

He had never been any good at writing and a lot of the things about the Skimmers he could not get down. He worked on the writing in his cell, listening all the time for the sound of new motors or big things moving. It

was hard to tell anything about what the teams were doing. He was glad he could rest in the shadows of the cell and think, eating the food they brought him as quickly as he could while still getting the taste of it.

The same chinless guard he had from the first came once a day to take him down to the shore. Warren carried the waste bucket. The guard would not let him take the time to bury the waste and instead made him throw it into the surf. The guard stayed back in the sea-grape bushes while Warren went down to the lagoon. The man was probably under orders not to show himself on the beach, Warren guessed. On the windward side of the island there was a lot of dry grass and some gullies. Dried-up stream beds ran down into little half-moon beaches and Warren could see the teams had moored catboats and other small craft there. Some of the troops had pitched tents far back in the gullies but most of them were empty. The guard marched him back that way. On one of the sandy crescents Warren's raft was beached, dragged up above the tide line but not weighted down or moored.

Coming back on the second day some sooty terns were hanging in the wind, calling with long low cries. Some were nested in the rocks up at the windward and others in the grass of the lee. The terns would fall off the wind and swoop down over the heads of the men gathering the eggs out of the rocky nests. The birds cawed and dipped down through the wind but the men did not look up.

The next morning the chinless soldier came too soon after the breakfast tin and Warren had to straighten his sleeping pad in a hurry. The guard never came into the shadowy cell because of the smell from the bucket which Warren kept next to the door. The man had discovered that Warren knew no Chinese and so instead of giving orders he shoved Warren in whatever direction he wanted. This time they went north.

Tseng was surveying a work team at a point halfway up the ridge at the middle of the island. He nodded to Warren and signaled that the guard should remain nearby. "Your report?"

"Nearly done with it."

"Good. I will translate it myself. Be sure it is legible."

"I printed it out."

"Just as do the Skimmers."

"Yeah."

"We duplicated your methods, you know, and dropped several messages into the lagoon." He pointed to a spot north of the pass through the reef. From here on the ridge the moving shadows were plain against the sand. The soft green of the lagoon was like a ring and beyond it was the hard blue that

went to the horizon. "No reply."

"How'd you deliver them?"

"Three men, two armed for safety. After so many incidents they are afraid to go out unprotected."

"They go in that?" Warren pointed to a skiff beached below them.

"Yes. I'm going to supplement their work with a set of acoustics. They should be—yes, here we are." A buzz came from the south and a motorboat came up the lagoon leaving a white wake. It cut in among the shoals and sand bars and a big reel on the back of it was spinning in the sun, throwing quick darts of yellow into Warren's eyes.

"We will have a complete acoustic bed. A very promising method."

"You make any sense out of that?"

Tseng shaded his eyes against the glare and turned to smile at Warren. "Their high-frequency 'songs' are their basic method of communication. We already have much experience with the dolphins. We can converse freely with them. Only on simple-minded subjects, of course. Much of what we know about Swarmer and Skimmer movements comes from the dolphins."

Warren said sharply, "Look, why fool with that stuff. Let me go out and I'll ask them what you want."

Tseng nodded. "Eventually I might. But you must understand that the Skimmers have reasons of their own for not telling you everything that is important."

"Such as?"

"Here." Tseng snapped his fingers at an aide standing nearby. The soldier brought over a document pouch. Tseng took out a set of photographs and handed them to Warren. The top one was a color shot of a woman's stomach and breasts. There were small bumps on them, white mounds on the tan skin. One lump was in her left nipple.

Warren went on to the next, and the next. The lumps got bigger and whiter. "They are quite painful," Tseng said distantly. "Some kind of larva burrows into a sweat-sore and in a day this begins. The larva is biggest near the skin, armed with sharp yellow spines. The worm turns as it feeds. Spines grate against the nerves. The victim feels sudden, deep pain. Within another day the victim is hysterical and tries to claw the larva out. These are small larvae. There are reports of larger ones."

In one photograph the open sores were bleeding and dripping a white pus. "Like a tick," Warren said. "Burn it out. Use iodine. Or cover it with tape so it can't get air."

Tseng sighed. "Any such attack and the larva releases

something, we are unsure what, into the victim's bloodstream. It paralyzes the victim so he cannot treat himself further."

"Well, if you—"

"The larva apparently does not breathe. It takes oxygen directly from the host. If anything dislodges the spines, once they are hooked in, the larva releases the paralyzer and something else, something that carries a kind of egg so that other larvae can grow elsewhere. All this in minutes."

Warren shook his head. "Never heard of any tick or bug like that."

"They come from the Swarmers. When they are ashore."

Warren watched the motorboat methodically criss-crossing the lagoon, the reel spinning. He shook his head. "Something to do with their mating? Don't know. The Skimmers—"

"They said nothing about it. Interesting, eh?"

"Maybe they don't know."

"It seems unlikely."

"So you're listening for what?"

"Contact between the Skimmers and the Swarmers. Some knowledge of how they interact."

"Can't you treat this bug, get rid of it?"

"Possibly. The European medical centers are at work now. But there are other diseases. They are spreading rapidly from contact points near Ning-po and Macau."

"Maybe you can block them off."

"The things are everywhere. They come ashore and the larvae are carried by the birds, by animals—somehow. That is why we burn our reserves of fuel to come this far."

"To the islands?"

"Only in isolation do they make contact. The reported incidents are from the Pacific basin. That is why there are Japanese aircraft near here, Soviet, American—you are an American, aren't you?"

"No."

"Oh? Somehow I thought—but never mind. The other powers are desperate. They do not know what is happening and they envy our lead in information. You will notice the installation to the south?"

Tseng gestured. Warren saw at the rocky tip of the island a fan of slender shapes knifing up at the sky. "Anti-air missiles. We would not want anyone else to exploit this opportunity."

"Uh huh."

The motorboat droned, working its way up the eastern shore. Warren studied the island, noticing where the tents were pitched and where the men moved in work teams and where the scrub jungle cut off visibility.

"If you're smart you won't use a motor in the lagoon."

"The men will not go out without some way of returning

quickly. I understand their fear. I have seen—"

An aide approached. He spoke quickly and Tseng answered with anxiety creeping into his voice. Warren watched the motorboat cross near the sand bar and saw the shadows dart and twist and turn, swift black shapes in the watery green light.

That night he felt a dark hammering thing above him that wove and wove, rippling, swimming badly, and dropping metal that settled on him, heavy and foul. The steady dead rasp from above cut and burned and he turned on his side. Then he was above the motor and saw the fuel line backfilled and heard the sluggish rumble as they blew the lines out and heard the plugs not running right either. He turned over again and felt his wife sleeping against him warm and then on top of him the way she liked. She was heavy too like the falling spreading metal the hammering machine laid in the lagoon, heavy and yet soft, and her hair lay on his face silky and in his eyes. In shadows her face was intersecting planes lean and white the way he had always liked and he took her hair in his mouth and tasted it. The salt and musk was like her sex below. He touched the canted planes of her and remembered that she had fallen away from him when he had wanted her weight, and her hair swinging across him and the taste of it.

When he woke the pad was damp with sweat. He felt in the blackness for the table turned over on its side to conceal the far wall and this reassuring flat plane of wood gave him back the present so he did not have to think about the past. But he remembered the hammering from above and the falling cold metal and knew how much they hated what was happening to them out in the lagoon.

Before dawn his cell rattled and there was a booming that rolled down from the sky. He woke and looked out the windows through the heavy wire mesh. High up in the black, luminous things tumbled and exploded into auras of blue and crimson and then gutted into nothing. Distant hollow boomings came long after the lights were gone and then the sounds faded into the crashing on the reef.

In the morning the chinless soldier came again and took the tin dish that Warren had rubbed clean. The soldier did not like this job and he cuffed Warren twice to show him where to walk. First they went to the beach with the waste bucket, which had more in it now because Warren's body no longer absorbed almost everything he was fed. From the beach he watched the small motor ketches

and cats that stayed near the shore while they laid something into the water, dropping boxes off the stern where they would lie on the bottom and, Warren was sure, send back reports on the passing sounds and movements.

The guard took him north and inland, just out of view of the reef. Tseng was there with a crowd and they were all watching the green water from far back among the trees.

"See them?" Tseng said to Warren when he had worked his way through the group of men and women. Warren looked out past the brilliant white sand that stung the eyes and saw silver-blue forms leaping.

"What's . . . why are they doing that?" he asked.

"We are returning their acoustic signals to them. As a kind of test."

"Not smart."

"Oh?" Tseng turned with interest. "Why?"

"I can't really tell you but—"

"It is a technique of progression. We give them back their songs. We see how they react. The dolphins eventually did well with this approach."

"These aren't dolphins."

"So. Yes." Tseng seemed to lose interest in the splashing forms in the lagoon. He turned, hands placed neatly behind his back, and led Warren through the group of advisors around them. "But you must admit they are giving a kind of response."

Warren swore. "Would you talk to somebody if they kept poking you in the eye?"

"Not a good analogy."

"Yeah?"

"Still . . ." Tseng slowed, peering out through the brush and palm trees at the glistening water. "You are the only one who got the material about how they came here. Getting scooped up and going on a long voyage and then being dumped into the ocean—you got that. I had not heard it before.

"It does make a certain kind of sense. Fish like that—they might make printed messages, yes. They have shown they can put together our own wreckage and make a kind of electrostatic printing press—underwater, even. But to build a rocket? A ship that goes between stars? No."

"Somebody brought them."

"I am beginning to believe that. But why? To spread these diseases?"

"I dunno. Let me go out and—"

"Later, when we are more sure. Yes, then. But tomorrow we have more tests."

"Have you counted the number of them out there?"

"No. They are hard to keep track of. I—"

"There are a lot less of 'em now. I can see. You know what happens when you drive them away?"

"Warren, you will get your turn." Tseng put a restraining hand on his sleeve. "I know you have had a hard time here and on that raft but believe me, we are able to—"

Gijan approached, carrying some pieces of paper. He rattled off something in Chinese and Tseng nodded. "I am afraid we are being interrupted once more. Those incidents last night—you saw them?—have involved us, a research party, in— Well, the Americans have been humiliated again. Their missiles we knocked down with ease."

"You're sure that stuff was theirs?"

"They are the ones complaining—isn't the conclusion obvious? I believe they and perhaps too their lackeys, the Japanese, have discovered how much progress we are making. They would very much like to turn the Swarmers and their larvae to their own nationalistic advantage. These messages—" he waved the pack of them— "are more diplomatic notices. The Japanese have given my government an ultimatum of sorts. I am sure even you understand that this is part of a larger game. Of course China does not wish to use the Swarmers against other powers, even if we did understand the creatures."

"I don't know about that."

"But I thought you were American." Tseng smiled without mirth.

"No."

"I see. I think it is perhaps time to have Underofficer Gijan take you back to your little room, then."

The guard took Warren down the center of the island, along a path worn smooth in the last few days by the troops. They passed a dozen technicians working on acoustic equipment and playing back the high-pitched squeals of Skimmer song. The troops were making entries on computer screens and chattering to each other, breaking down the problem into bits that could be cross-referenced and reassembled to make patterns that people could understand. It would have to be good because they wanted to eavesdrop. But the way the Skimmers talked to the Swarmers might not be anything like the songs the Skimmers sung among themselves.

It made no sense that the Skimmers had much control over the Swarmers, Warren thought to himself as he marched down the dirt path. No sense at all. Something had brought them all to Earth and given the Swarmers some disease and the answer lay in thinking about that fact, not playing stupid games with machines in the water.

The troops were spread out more now, he saw. There were nests of high-caliber cannon strung out along the ridge and

down near the beaches men were digging in where they could set up a cross-fire over the natural clearings.

The men and women he passed were talking among themselves now, not silent and efficient the way they had been at first. They looked at him with suspicion. He guessed the missile attack in the night had made them nervous and even the hot work of clearing fields of fire in the heavy humidity did not take it out of them.

Coming down the rocky ridgeline Warren slipped on a stone and fell. The guard hit him to get him to hurry. Warren went on and saw ahead one of the bushes with leaves he knew he could eat and when he went by it he pulled some off and started to stuff them into his pockets for later. The guard shouted and hit him in the back with the butt of his rifle and Warren went down suddenly, banging his knee on a big tree root. The guard kicked him in the ribs and Warren saw the man was jumpy and bored at the same time. That was dangerous. He carefully got up and moved along the path, limping from the dull pain spreading in his knee. The guard pushed him into his cell and kicked him again. Warren fell and lay there, not moving, waiting, and the guard finally grunted and slammed the door.

Noon came and went and he got no food. He ate the leaves. He did not blame the Chinese for the way they treated him. The great powers all acted the same, independent of what they said their politics were, and it was easier to think of them as big machines that did what they were designed to do rather than as bunches of people.

Night came. Warren had gotten used to not thinking about food when he was on the raft and he was just as glad the guard did not bring food. Eventually the squat chinless soldier would come all the way into the cell and look behind the table which was overturned and would see the dirt mounds. Warren lay on the rocky ground that was the floor and wondered if he would dream of his wife again. It was a good dream because it took away all the pain they both had caused and left only her smells and taste. But when he dozed off he was in the deep place where clanking came from above, a metallic sound that blended with the dull buzzing he had heard all that afternoon from the motorboat in the lagoon, the sounds washing together until he realized they were the same but the loud clanking one was the way the Skimmers heard it. It was hard to think with the ringing hammering sound in his head and he tried to swim up and break water to get away from it. The clanking went on and then was

a roar, louder, and he woke up suddenly and felt the sides of the cell tremble with the sound. Two abrupt crashes came down out of the sky and then sudden blue light.

Warren looked out through the mesh on the windows and saw women running. There was no moon but in the starlight he could see they were carrying rifles. A sudden rattling came from the north and west and then answering fire from up on the ridge.

He used the flickering light from the windows to find the map Tseng had given him. He pulled back the sleeping pad to expose the hole he had dug and without hesitation crawled in. He knew the feel of it well and in the complete dark found the stone at the end he used. He had estimated that there was only a foot of dirt left above. Using the pan to scrape away the last few feet of dirt had left him with a feel for how strong the earth was above but when he hit it with the stone it did not give. There was not much room to swing and three more solid hits did not even shake loose clods of it. Warren was sweating in the closeness of the tunnel and the dirt stuck to his face as he chipped away at the hard soil over him. It was hardpacked and filled with rocks that struck him in the face and rolled onto his chest. His arm started to ache and then tire but he did not stop. He switched the stone to his left hand and felt a softness give above and then was hitting nothing. The stone broke the crust and he could see stars.

He studied the area carefully. A soldier ran by carrying a tripod for an automatic rifle. The sharp cracking fire still came from north and west.

There was a spark of light high up and Warren snapped his head away to keep his night vision. Then the glare was gone and a hollow roar rolled over the camp. Mortars, not far away. He struggled up out of the tunnel and ran for the trees nearby. Halfway there his knee folded under him and he cursed it silently as he went down. It was worse than he had thought from the fall, and lying on the hard cell floor had made it go stiff. He got up and limped to the trees, each moment feeling a spot between his shoulderblades where the slug would come if any of the running men in the camp behind him saw the shadow making its painful way. The slug did not come but a flare went up as he reached a clump of bushes. He threw himself into them and rolled over so he could see the clearing. The flare had taken away most of his night vision. He waited for it to come back and smelled the wind. There was something heavy and musky in it. It was the easterly trade, blowing steady, which meant the tide was getting ready

to shift and it was past midnight. Coming from the east the wind should not have picked up the smell of the fire fight so the musky smell was something else. Warren knew the taste but could not remember what it was and what it might mean about the tide. He squinted, moving back into the bush, and saw a man in the camp coming straight toward him.

The figure stopped at the door of Warren's cell. It fumbled at the door and a banging of automatic-weapons fire came from the other side of camp. The man jumped back and yelled to someone and then went back to trying to unlock the door. Warren glanced into the distance where sudden flashes lit the camp in pale orange light. The firing got heavier, and when he looked back at the cell there were two men there and the first one was opening the door. Warren crawled out of the dry bushes, moving when a burst of machine gun fire covered any sound he might make. He got to a thin stand of trees and turned. A flare went up, burning yellow. It was the chinless soldier. He had the door open and Gijan was coming out, waving a hand, pointing north. They shouted at each other for a moment. Warren edged back further into the trees. He was about fifty meters away now and could see each man unshoulder the slim rifles they carried. They held them at the ready. Gijan pointed again and the two men separated, moving apart about thirty meters. They were going to search. They turned and walked into the brush. Gijan came straight at Warren.

It would be easy to give himself up now. Wait for a flare and come forward with his hands held high. He had counted on getting further away than this before anyone came after him. Now in the dark and with the fighting going there was a good chance they were jumpy and would shoot him if they saw some movement. But as he thought this Warren moved back, sinking into the shadows. He had faced worse than this on the raft. He limped away, going by feel in the shadows.

He reached a line of palms and moved along them toward the north. He was still about five hundred meters from the beach but there was a big clearing in the way so he angled in toward the ridge. Muffled thuds from the west told him that the Chinese were using mortars against whoever was coming into the beaches. Five spaced screeches cut through the deep sounds of distant battle.

Warren guessed the Japanese or the Americans had decided to take the island and try to speak to the Skimmers themselves. Maybe they would try their own machines and codes.

They might know about him,

though. The Chinese wanted to keep him or else Gijan would not have come with the soldier. Warren stumbled and slammed his knee into a tree. He paused, panting and trying to see if the men were within sight. With a moment to think he saw that Gijan might want to kill him to keep him out of the hands of the others. He could not be sure that giving himself up was safe anymore.

The five shrill notes came again and he recognized them as an emergency signal blown on a whistle. They were from close by. Gijan was calling for help. With the Chinese fighting other troops on the other side of the island, Gijan might not get a quick answer. But help would come and then they would box him in.

Warren turned toward the beach. He moved as fast as he could without making a lot of noise. His knee went out from under him again and as he got up he realized he was not going to give them much trouble. They had him bracketed already; they had good knees, and help was coming. He could not outrun them. The only chance he had was to circle around and ambush one of them, ambush an armed, well-trained man, using his bare hands. Then get away before the other one found out.

He picked up a rock and put it in his pocket. It banged against his leg with each step. A rustling came from behind him and he hurried and stumbled at the edge of a gully.

A shout. He jumped down into the gully. As he landed there was a sharp crack and something zipped by overhead. It chunked into a tree on the other bank. Warren knew there was no point in going back now.

He trotted down the deepening water-carved wash. It was too narrow for two men. He tried to think how Gijan would figure it. The smartest thing was to wait for the other troops and then comb the area.

But Warren might reach the beach by then. Better to send one man down the gully and another through the trees, to cut him off.

Warren went what felt like a hundred meters before he stopped to listen. The crack of a twig snapping came from far back in the blackness. To the left? He could not be sure. The gully was rocky and it slowed him down. There were some good places to hide in the shadows and then try to hit the following man as he came by. Better than in the scrub above, anyway. But by then the other man would have gotten between him and the beach.

A pebble rattled faintly behind him. He stopped. The hard clay of the gully was three meters high here and steep. He found some thick roots sticking out and carefully pulled himself

up. He stuck his head above the edge and looked around. Nothing moving. He crawled over the lip and a rock came loose under his foot. He lunged and caught it. A stabbing pain came in his knee and he bit his tongue to keep from making a noise.

The scrub was thicker here. He rolled into a stand of trees, keeping down and out of the starlight. Twigs snagged at his clothes.

There was an even chance the man would come on this side of the gully. If he didn't Warren could slip off to the north. But Gijan had probably guessed where he was headed and he would not have much of a lead when he reached the beach. On the open sand he would be exposed, easy to pick off.

Warren crawled into the dark patches under the trees and waited, rubbing his leg. The wind smelled bad here, damp and heavy. He wondered if the tide had changed.

He leaned his head on his hands to rest and felt a muscle jump in his face. It startled him. He could not feel it unless he put his hand to it. So Tseng had been right and he did have a spasm without knowing it. Warren frowned. He did not know what to think about that. It was a fact he would have to understand. For now, though, he put the thought away from him and watched the darkness.

He pulled the rock out of his pocket and hefted it and a pale form moved in the trees forty meters inland. It was a short soldier, the chinless one. Warren crouched low to follow. The pain that shot through his knee reminded him of how the chinless man had kicked him but the memory did not make him feel anything about what he was going to do. He moved forward.

In the dry brush he kept as quiet as he could. The dull claps and crashes that came over the ridge were muffled now, just when he needed them to be loud. Under the trees it was quieter, and he was surprised to hear the rasping of the soldier breathing. The man moved slowly, rifle at the ready, the weapon looking big in the starlight. The man kept in the starlight and watched the shadows. That was smart.

The breathing got louder. Warren moved, favoring his knee. He would have to jump up fast and take the soldier from behind.

The figure came closer. Suddenly Warren saw that the man wore a helmet. To use the rock now he would have to hit him in the face. That made the odds a lot worse. But he would have to try.

The man stopped, turned, looked around. Warren froze and waited. The head turned away and Warren eased forward, closing, the pain shooting in his knee. The leg would try

to give way when he came up for the rush. He would watch for that and force it to hold. The air was still and heavy under the trees and the smell was worse, something from the beach. The soldier's was the only visible movement.

In the quilted pattern of shadows and light it was hard to follow the silhouette. Warren put his hand out and gathered his feet under him and felt something wet and slick ahead and suddenly knew that the slow rasping laboring breath did not come from the chinless soldier but from something between them. He felt the ground and brought his hand up to his face and smelled the strong reek he had tasted on the wind. Ahead in the faint light that fell between two palms he saw the long form struggling, pulling itself forward on blunt legs. It sucked in the air with each step. It was thick and heavy and the skin was a gunmetal gray, pocked with inch-wide round holes. Warren felt a whirring in the air and something brushed against his face, lingered, and was gone. Another whirring followed, so quiet he could barely hear it. The stubby fin-legs of the Swarmer went mechanically forward and back, dragging its bloated body. In the starlight he could see the glistening where fluid seeped from the moist holes. **the young run with sores** Another small whirring sound came and he saw from one of the dark openings a thing as big as a finger spring out, slick with moisture, and spread its wings. It beat against the thick and reeking air and then lifted its heavy body, coming free of its hole, wings fluttering. It lifted into the air and hovered, seeking. It darted away, missing Warren, passing on into the night. He did not move. The Swarmer pulled itself forward. Its dry rattling gasps caught the attention of the soldier and the man turned and took a step. The Swarmer gathered itself and kicked with its hind leg. It reached the man's leg and the massive head turned to take the calf between its jaws. It seized and twisted and Warren heard the sharp intake of breath before the soldier went down. He screamed and the Swarmer turned itself and rolled over the man. The long blunt head came up and nuzzled down into the belly of the man and the sharp shrill scream cut off suddenly. Warren stood, the smell stronger now, and watched the two forms struggle on the open sand. The man pawed for his rifle where it had fallen and the thick leg of the Swarmer pinned his arm. They rolled to the side. The thing wallowed on him, covering him with a slick sheen, cutting off the low moans he made. Warren ran toward them and picked up the rifle. He backed away, thumbing off the safety.

The man went limp and the air rushed out of him as the alien settled into place. Its head turned toward Warren and held there for a moment and then it turned back and dipped down to the belly of the man. It began feeding.

The soldier was dead. Gijan had heard the screams and would be here soon. There was no point in shooting the Swarmer and giving Gijan a sound to follow. Warren turned and limped away from the licking and chewing sounds.

He walked silently through brush, hobbling. The rifle had a bayonet on the muzzle. If a Swarmer came at him he would use that instead of firing. He stayed in the open, watching the shadows.

Abruptly from behind him came a loud hammering of automatic fire. Warren dodged to the side and then realized that no bullets were thumping into the trees near him. It was Gijan, killing the Swarmer a hundred meters or more away.

Warren was sure the Chinese did not know the Swarmers were crawling ashore or else they would have come after him in a group. Now Gijan would be shaken and uncertain. But in a few minutes he would recover and know what he had to do. Gijan would run to the beach, moving faster than Warren could, and try to cut him off.

Warren heard a light humming. He looked up between the trees where the sound came and could see nothing against the stars.

* *the* **World** *that was false* **World** *made them this way not as they were when we knew them in the* **World** *that was ours they cannot sing but know of the places where you sing to each other and some now go there with their sores they may be chewed by you but there are many many* *

Something smacked into his throat. It was wet and it attached itself with a sudden clenching thrust like a ball of needles. Warren snatched at it. He stopped an inch short of grabbing at the thing when he caught the musty sea stench full in his nostrils. The moist lump dripped something down his throat. He brought the rifle up quickly and pointed the bayonet at his throat and jabbed, aiming by instinct in the dark. He felt the tip go into the thing and he turned the blade so it scraped, pulling the wet centimeter-long larva out. It came away before the spines had sunk in. Blood seeped out and trickled down his throat. He sopped it up with his sleeve and held the bayonet up in the starlight. The thing was white as a maggot and twisted feebly on the blade. One wing fluttered. The other was gone. The skin of it peeled back some more and the wing fell off. He stuck the blade into the sand to clean it and stepped on the thing that moved in spasms on

the ground. Something still stuck on his neck. He scraped it off. The other wing was on the blade and some thin dark needles. He wiped them on the sand and with a sudden rushing fear slammed his heel down on them again and again.

He was breathing hard by the time he reached the beach. The fear had gone away when he had concentrated on staying away from the shadows, not thinking about what could be in them. The stabbing pain in his knee helped. He listened for the deep rasping and the humming and tasted the wind for their smell.

He hobbled out from the last line of palms and onto the white glow of the beach beneath the stars. He could see maybe fifty meters and there were no dark forms struggling up from the water. To the north he could hear faint shouts. That did not bother him because he did not have far to go. He stumbled toward the shouts, ignoring the quick rippling flashes of yellow light from a mortar barrage and the long *crump* that came after them. There were motor boats moored in the shallows with the big reels in the stern but no one in them. He took an oar out of one.

He came around the last horn of a crescent beach and saw ahead the dark blotch of the raft far up on the sand. He threw his rifle aboard and began dragging the raft toward the water. Big combers boomed on the reef.

He got it into the shallows and rolled aboard without looking back. He pushed off with the oar and kept pushing until he felt the current catch him. Speed, now. Speed.

The tide had just turned. It was slow but it would pick up in a few minutes and take him toward the pass in the reef. When he was sure of that he sat down and felt for the rifle. Sitting, he would be harder to see and he could steady the rifle against his good knee. His throat had nearly stopped bleeding but his shirt was heavy with blood. He wondered if the flying things would smell it and find him. The Skimmers had never said anything about the things like maggots with wings and he was sure now it was because they did not know about it. There was no reason the Swarmers would have evolved a thing like that to help them live on the land. And with the Skimmers driven from the lagoon by the men there was nothing to keep the Swarmers from bringing the things ashore.

He saw something move on the land and he lay down on the raft and Gijan came out onto the sand, running. Gijan stopped and looked straight out at Warren and then turned and ran north. Warren picked up his rifle. Gijan was carrying his weapon at the ready. Was the man trying to cut him off but

keep him alive? Then he should have run south, toward the motorboats. But there might be boats to the north, too. Maybe Gijan had heard the shouts in that direction and was running for help.

Warren thumbed off the safety and put the rifle on automatic fire. He would know what to do if Gijan would tell him by some action what he intended to do. If he could just shout to the man, ask him— But maybe Gijan had not seen him after all. And the man might lie even if he answered.

Suddenly the running figure dropped his rifle and slapped at his neck and then fell heavily on the sand. He twisted and brought both hands to his neck and struggled for a moment. Then he brought something out from his neck and threw it into the water and made a sound of fear. Gijan lurched up and staggered. He still clutched his neck with one hand but turned and looked for his weapon. He seemed dazed. His head came up and his gaze swept past Warren and then came back again. Gijan had seen the raft for sure this time.

Warren wished he could read the man's face. Gijan hesitated only a moment. Then he picked up his weapon and turned to the north. He took some steps and Warren relaxed, and then there was something about the way Gijan moved his arm. Warren aimed quickly, with no pause for conscious thought, and Gijan was bringing the rifle around. It made a bright yellow flash, firing on automatic, as Gijan swept the muzzle, fanning, and Warren fired a burst. It took Gijan high in the shoulder and then in the chest, spinning him.

Warren slowly put down the rifle, panting. He had not thought at all about killing Gijan but had just done it, not stopping for the instant of balancing the equation and seeing if it had to be that way, and that was what had saved him.

He peered shoreward again. Voices, near. There was some sea still running against the ebb but now the tide was taking hold and carrying him out. The pass was a dark patch in the snarling white of the combers. He had to get away fast now because the men to the north would be coming toward the gunfire. Hoisting the sail would just give them a target. He had to wait for the slow steady draw to take him through.

Something thumped against the bottom of the raft. It came again. Warren stood and cradled the rifle. The boards worked against each other as they came into the chop near the pass. A big dark thing broke water and rolled hugely. Eyes looked at him and legs that had grown from fins kicked against the current. The Swarmer turned and wallowed in the wash from the passage and then sank, the great

head turning toward shore.

Warren used the oar to turn the raft free of the rocks. The surf broke to each side and the deep bands of current sucked the raft through with a sudden rush. Behind him Warren heard a cry, lonely and harsh and full of surprise. The warring rumbled beyond the ridge and was lost in the crashing of the waves running hard before an east wind and he went out into the dark ocean, the raft rising fast and plunging as it came into the full sea swell.

A sharp crack. A motorboat was coming fast behind. Warren lay flat on the raft and groped for his rifle.

They would get him out here for sure. He aimed at the place where the pilot would be but in the fast chop he knew he would miss. There came a short, stuttering bark of automatic-weapons fire.

The raft slewed to port and the boat turned to follow. Warren crawled to the edge of the raft, ready to slip overboard when they got too close. It would be better than getting cut down, even with the Swarmers in the water.

The boat whined and bounced on the swell, bearing down. He lifted the rifle to take aim and knew the odds were damn long against him. He saw a muzzle flash and the deck spat splinters at him where the shots hit. Warren squeezed carefully and narrowed his eyes to frame the target and saw something leap suddenly across the bow of the boat. It was big and another followed, landing in front of the pilot and wriggling back over the windshield in one motion. It crashed into the men there. Shouts. A blue-white shape flicked a man overboard and knocked another sprawling. The boat veered to starboard. From this angle Warren could see the pilot holding to the wheel and crouched to avoid the flicking tail of the Skimmer.

A hammering of the automatic weapon. The Skimmer jumped and slashed at the man with its tail. Warren leaped up and rocked against the swell to improve his aim. He got off two quick shots at the man. The figure staggered and the Skimmer struck him solidly and he pitched over the side. The pilot glanced back and saw he was alone. The Skimmer stopped thrashing and went still. Warren did not give the man time to think. He fired at the dark splotch at the wheel until it was gone.

Distant shouts came from shore but no sounds of another boat. The boat drifted away. Warren thought of the Skimmer who lay dead in it. He tried to reach the boat, but the currents separated them further. In moments it was gone in the darkness and the island itself faded into a mere looming shadow on the sea.

## IX.

At noon the next day three jets split the sky with their roaring and passed over to the south. All morning the sky had been streaked with the trails of craft that flew high and made no sound. He had rounded the island in the night and run up his worn sail and then run before the wind to get distance. He had the map from Tseng and the fishing lines were still on the raft with their hooks so he could try for something. The rifle had no rounds left in its clip but with the bayonet it made a good gaff. He had a strike in the morning from a small tuna but it had got away as he hauled it in. But there would be more now that the Swarmers were going to land and not taking them.

In the night there was a sudden distant glare of orange light reflected off clouds near the horizon. It became a glow and the color seeped out of it and then it was gone. Afterward a rolling hammer blow of sound came. Later there were more huge bursts of light, faint and far away.

High up, silvery specks coasted smoothly across the dark. One by one they vanished in bright firefly glows—yellow, blue, orange. Satellite warfare. Soon they were gone.

At dawn he woke and searched the sky and found the thin silver thread that reached up into the dark bowl overhead.

But now it curled about itself. Warren looked down the sky toward the dawn and found another pale streak far below, where nothing should be. The Skyhook was broken. Part of it was turning upward while the other fell. Somebody had blown it in two.

For long moments he watched the faint band fall. Finally he lost it in the glare as the sun rose. There had been men and women working on the lower tip of the Skyhook and he tried to imagine what it was to fall hopeless that far and that long and then to burn quick and high in the air like a shooting star.

His knee had swollen up now and he could not stand so he lay in the shade of the sail. The wound in his neck had a crusted blue scab and did not hurt so much. He thought it would be all right. He would ask the Skimmers about the larvae that flew but he was sure that they were not natural to the Swarmers. Something had changed the Swarmers so that the Skimmers did not know them any more.

He remembered the sheets he had written on, the tangled sentences and thoughts, things he had not been able to understand. He had known that the Skimmers hated the machines that intruded into the water. They had learned that through the long years of voyaging, when they had been in ships, carried

like cargo, moved and fed and poked at by things that hummed and jerked and yet had no true life, things they had never seen before: machines. Computers and robots that could span the stars. A civilization of nothing but devices and remorseless logic. Things that had evolved, because the same laws of selection operated on them as did on living matter. Things that came out of those laws and would kill to survive, to protect themselves from any enemy. And life—arising from nothing at all, flowering and blooming wherever chemicals met and sunlight boomed through a blanket of gas—life was constant competition. The machines must have come from long-dead civilizations whose computer nets survived, but in time the machines would come to fear the rivalry of life that burst forth from every possible corner of the galaxy. And fear would, by evolution's logic, kindle something that could stir the machines to action when necessary, something like hatred.

In the long years of their voyage, that would become clear to the ripe cargo the machines carried. So the Swarmers and Skimmers had come to hate them in return. And when they saw the simple, noisy machines of men they hated those, too.

He fished through the day without success.

That night there were more orange flashes to the west. Then, in the hours before dawn, things moved in the sky. Shapes glided through the black, catching the sunlight as they moved out of the Earth's shadow. They were in close orbit, moving fast, the orbits repeating in less than an hour. They were huge and irregular, their surfaces grainy and blotched. For Warren to be able to see the features on them they had to be far bigger than the ships that had brought the Swarmers and Skimmers.

No defenses rose to meet these shapes. There were no military satellites left, no high-energy lasers, no particle beam weapons. The ships absorbed the sunlight and gave back a strange glowing gray. As Warren watched they began to split. Chunks broke away and fell, separating again and again as they streaked across the sky.

The gray ships were bigger than the earlier ones, but they had the same aim. To set one kind of life against another. To cause a war that looked to men like a simple fight with aliens from the sea.

So the men had done the same things they always did when they were in groups. The Swarmers were a threat, but there were always humans who would use the situation against each other, to get the advantage, and somehow the thing had gotten away from them and

in these last nights the terrible weapons had at last been used.

Nuclear war, once ignited, was a runaway instability. Life at this stage of development was vulnerable to it. The machines probably knew that. They understood that the humans, carried away by passions, would miss the fact that the Swarmers and Skimmers were only a piece of a bigger puzzle. That somewhere something wanted life to cancel other life and for each form to pull the other down. An efficient way to eliminate competitors.

The Skimmers knew these machines, had lived for generations in them. *The gray things float deep beneath the waves,* the Skimmers had said. *They mine the sea and their factories clank and we can hear them for great distances. They make copies of themselves. The Swarmers are gone to the land and the gray things think they are safe.*

He caught some small fish in the afternoon and used them to bait the lines. He got two hits immediately and brought them in. The meat was tough and strong-flavored. The sea was gathering itself again after the long time of the Swarmers, blossoming, growing, the schools of fish returning. He was sure he could live here now.

*They think they are safe. They think there is only us, trapped in this new World. We cannot make tools. But we know the waters and the machines do not, cannot know them, cannot taste the essence of them.*

He watched the long rolling waves, squinting. The Skimmers had spoken of other men and women who had learned to live on the sea. Remnants. They would have little to work with, just the wreckage of the mainlands where the death was spreading and of old ships, but with the Skimmers they could fashion things.

To reach the land the gray machines would have to come up finally. They would be prepared to take the solid ground. They would not be ready for life that had fought battles and lost them and endured and fought again because it did not know it was defeated, and went on silently, still peering forward and by instinct seeking other life, and still waiting when the gray things began to move again, still powerful and still asking as life always does, and still dangerous and still coming.

He finished the fish he had caught and lay there letting the sun warm him. As dusk came he could see more of the gray shapes in orbit but they did not fill him with the fear he had known before. He was tired. He fell asleep early. He lay face down on the worn deck, rolling gently with the steady swell. He did not wake at first when a Skimmer leaped near the raft. He was dreaming of his wife. ■

## ASIMOV ON SCIENCE FICTION

*(Continued from page 17)*

If we can reach them and if we have gravity control, then it may be possible to enter them. According to some theories, it might be possible to pass through black holes and cover vast distances in short periods of time. Black holes may therefore be the key to interstellar travel. In addition, they may offer sources of energy greater than anything else in the Universe and even nuclear fusion and solar power would shrink in comparison.

**Galactic Empires**—However interstellar travel may be achieved, human beings may someday occupy many planetary systems in the Galaxy, either living on planetary surfaces directly or on artificial settlements within the system. With faster-than-light communication, the Galaxy might become a single economic unit, albeit with endless varieties of individual cultures. In fact, it may not be entirely human in nature; there may be hundreds or even millions of other intelligences, all cooperating in a brotherhood of the mind.

**Time Travel**—Might we some time gain the ability to travel through time as we can travel through space? Travel into the past may be of great use in historical, sociological, archeological, and paleontological research. Travel into the future may bring us back knowledge that will offer us shortcuts to further heights of development.

**Alternate Time Paths**—Time travel might not be of a nature that would confine us to observation only. We might be able to participate in the times we visit. If so, we would surely be tempted to interfere with events. Why not prevent Lincoln's assassination, or the start of World War I, or the rise of Nazism? Why not order events now so as to prevent a specific catastrophe we have seen in the future? Time travel might make it possible to pick and choose between alternate time paths and adjust history to the greatest advantage of humanity.

NOTE: Some of these dreams, such as gravitational control or time travel, are probably impossible even in theory. Others, such as the use of black holes or mass transference or galactic empires or telepathy, would seem to be unlikely in the extreme.

Almost any dream can turn into a nightmare. A world government may become a universal, oppressive dictatorship. Control of evolution may produce a race of mediocrities. Computers may reduce human beings to helplessness or even obsolescence. Telepathy may end the last vestige of privacy.

—Nevertheless, what is life without dreams? ■

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Man can only hope that the first alien species we contact will be friendly. Or—at least—that rescuers won't be far off.

# THE PRIDE OF CHANUR

BY C. J. CHERRYH

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There had been something loose about the station dock all morning, skulking in amongst the gantries and the lines and the cannisters which were waiting to be moved. It was pale, naked, starved-looking in what fleeting glimpse anyone on *The Pride of Chanur* had had of it. Evidently no one had reported it to station authorities, nor did *The Pride*. Involving oneself in others' concerns at Meetpoint Station, where several species came to trade and provision, was ill-advised. Whatever it was, it was bipedal, bracchiate, and quick at making itself unseen. It had surely gotten away from someone, and likeliest were the kif, who had a thieving finger in everything, and who were not above kidnapping.

So far it had done nothing, stolen nothing. No one wanted to get involved in question and answer between original owners and station authorities; and so far no official statement had come down from those station au-

thorities and no notice of its loss had been posted by any ship, which itself argued that a wise person should not ask questions. The crew reported it to the captain and chased it, twice, from *The Pride's* loading area.

It was the last matter on the mind of the noble, the distinguished Captain Pyanfar Chanur, who was setting out down her own rampway for the docks. She was hani, this captain, splendidly maned and bearded in red-gold, dressed as befitted a hani of captain's rank: blousing scarlet breeches tucked up at her waist with a broad gold belt, with silk cords of every shade of red and orange wrapping that about, each knotted cord with a pendant jewel on its dangling end. She strode down her own rampway in the security of ownership, still high-blooded from a quarrel with her niece Hilfy—and yelled and bared claws as the intruder came bearing down on her.

She landed one raking, startled blow which would have held a hani in the encounter, but the hairless skin tore and it hurtled past her, taller than she was. It skidded round the bending of the curved ramp tube and bounded right into the ship, trailing blood all the way and leaving a bloody handprint on the rampway's white plastic wall.

Pyanfar gaped in outrage and pelted after, claws scrabbling for traction on the flooring plates. She made it into the airlock, hit the bar of the com panel there, and punched all-ship. "Alert! Something's gotten aboard. Seal yourselves into the nearest compartment." She flung open the locker next to the com unit, grabbed a pistol, and scrambled in pursuit of the intruder. Pyanfar ran, heard a shout from that intersecting corridor and scrambled for it: *Hilfy!* She rounded the corner at a slide and came up short on a tableau, the intruder's hairless, red-running back and young Hilfy Chanur holding the corridor beyond with nothing but bared claws and adolescent bluster.

"Idiot!" Pyanfar spat at Hilfy, and the intruder turned on *her* of a sudden, much closer. It brought up short in a staggered crouch, seeing the gun aimed two-handed at itself. It might have sense not to rush a weapon; might . . . but that would turn it right back at Hilfy, who stood unarmed behind. Pyanfar braced to fire on the least movement.

It stood rigidly still in its crouch, panting from its running and its wound. "Get out of there," Pyanfar said to Hilfy. *"Move!"*

The intruder shouted too, a snarl which almost got it shot; and drew itself upright and gestured to the center of its chest, twice, defiant. *Go on and shoot,* it seemed to invite her.

That intrigued Pyanfar. The intruder was not attractive. It

had a bedraggled gold mane and beard, and its chest fur, almost invisible, narrowed in a line down its heaving belly to vanish into what was, legitimately, clothing, a rag almost non-existent in its tatters and obscured by the dirt which matched the rest of its hairless hide. Its smell was rank. But a straight carriage and a wild-eyed invitation to its enemies . . . that deserved a second thought. It knew guns; it wore at least a token of clothing; it drew its line and meant to hold its territory. Male, maybe. It had that over-the-brink look in its eyes.

"Who are you?" Pyanfar asked slowly, in several languages one after the other, including kif. The intruder gave no sign of understanding any of them.

It crouched slowly, with a sullen scowl, all the way to the deck, and extended a blunt-nailed finger and wrote in its own blood, which was liberally puddled about its bare feet. It made a precise row of symbols, patiently, with increasing concentration despite the growing tremors of its hand, dipping its finger and writing with mad fixation on its task.

"What's it doing?" asked Hilfy, who could not see from her side.

"A writing system, probably numerical notation. It's no animal, niece. Call the crew," Pyanfar said levelly, and this time Hilfy scurried off in great haste. The intruder still struggled. Its pale blue eyes, for all their glassiness, seemed to have sense in them. It looked back at her warily with seeming mad cynicism.

Running broke into the corridors. Hilfy came hurrying back from her direction, the crew arriving from the other, and Pyanfar stepped aside as they arrived and the intruder tried to scramble off in retreat. The crew laid hands on it and jerked it, skidding along the bloody puddle.

"*Gently!*" Pyanfar yelled at them. "Do it no more damage. I'll have it clean, thank you; watered, fed, and healthy, but keep it restrained. Prepare me explanations how it got face to face with me in the rampway, and if one of you bleats a word of this outside the ship I'll sell you to the kif."

"Captain," they murmured, down-eared in deference. They were second and third cousins of hers, two sets of sisters, one set large and one small, and equally chagrinned.

"*Out,*" she said. They snatched the intruder up by the binding of its arms and prepared to drag it. "Careful!" Pyanfar hissed, reminding them, and they were gentler in pulling it along.

Pyanfar postponed her trip to station offices, walked back to the lower-deck operations center, and sat down at the com board amid all the telltales of cargo status and grapples and

the routine operations *The Pride* carried on automatically. She keyed in the current messages, sorted through those and found nothing, then delved into *The Pride*'s recording of all messages received since docking, and all which had flowed through station communications aimed at others. She searched first for anything kif-sent. Then she queried for notice of anything lost, and after that, for anything escaped.

*Mahendo'sat?* she queried then, looking for any key word about escapes or warnings of alien presence at Meetpoint.

So indeed. No one was going to say a word on the topic. The owners still did not want to acknowledge publicly that they had lost this item. The Chanur were not lackwitted, to announce publicly that they had found it. Or to trust that the kif or whoever had lost it were not at this moment turning the station inside out with a surreptitious search.

Pyanfar turned off the machine, flicked her ears so that the rings on the left one jangled soothingly. She got up and paced the center, thrust her hands into her belt, and thought about alternatives—and possible gains. It would be a dark day indeed when a Chanur went to the kif to hand back an acquisition. She could justifiably make a claim on it regarding legal liabilities and the invasion of a hani ship. Public hazard, it was called. But there were no outside witnesses to the intrusion, and the kif, almost certainly to blame, would not yield without a wrangle; which meant court. A Chanur, in station court with a howling mob of kif . . . and it would go to that extreme if kif came claiming this intruder. The whole business was unpalatable, in all its ramifications.

Whatever it was and wherever it came from, the creature was educated. That hinted in turn at other things, at cogent reasons why the kif might indeed be upset at the loss of this item and why they wished so little publicity in the search.

There was no leaving the ship with matters aboard still in flux. Pyanfar wandered belowdecks, where the corridors stank strongly of antiseptic and Tirun was lounging about, leaning against the wall by the lower-deck washroom door. "Well?" Pyanfar asked.

"We put it in there, Captain. Easiest to clean, by your leave. Haral left to pick up those items you ordered. Chur and Geran and *ker* Hilfy are out doing the loading. Thought someone ought to stay awhile by the door and listen, to be sure the creature's all right."

"Huh." Pyanfar pressed the bar. Her eyes missed the creature a moment, searched anxiously and located it in the corner, a heap of blankets between the

shower stall and the laundry . . . asleep or awake she could not tell with its head tucked down in its forearms. "Is it restrained?"

"It has chain enough to get to the head, if it understands what it's for."

Pyanfar stepped back outside and closed the door on it again. "Very likely it understands. Tirun, it *is* sapient or I'm blind. Don't assume it can't manipulate switches. No one is to go in there alone and no one's to carry firearms near it. Pass that order to the others personally, Hilfy too. —Especially Hilfy."

"Yes, Captain." Tirun's broad face was innocent of opinions. Gods knew what they were going to *do* with the creature if they kept it. Tirun did not ask. Pyanfar strolled off, meditating on the scene behind the washroom door . . . no lackwit, this creature who had twice tried her ship's security, and on the third attempt succeeded in getting through. Why *The Pride?* she wondered. Why her ship, out of all the others at dock? Because they were last in the section, before the bulkhead of the dock seal might force the creature to have left cover, and it was the last available choice? Or was there some other reason?

## II

A call on Meetpoint station officials was usually a pleasant affair. The stsho, placid and graceful, ran the station offices and bureaus on this side of the station, where oxygen breathers docked. They were another hairless species—stalk-thin, trisexed and hanilike only by the wildest stretch of the imagination, if eyes, nose, and mouth in biologically convenient order was similarity. Their manners were bizarre among themselves. But stsho had learned to suit their methodical plodding and their ceremoniousness to hani taste, which was to have a soft chair, a ready cup of herbal tea, a plate of exotic edibles, and an individual as pleasant as possible about the forms and the statistics, who could make it all like a social chat.

This stsho was unfamiliar. Stsho changed officials more readily than they changed ornament—either a different individual had come into control of Meetpoint Station, Pyanfar reckoned, or a stsho she had once known had entered a New Phase. —New doings? Pyanfar wondered, at the nudge of a small and prickly instinct—new doings? Loose Outsiders and stsho power shuffles? All changes were suspect when something was out of pocket.

Pyanfar left the necessary interview in high spirits and took the lift down to dock level. "Hai," she called, passing a mahendo'sat docking area. At

a ship called *Mahijiru* some of that tall, dark-furred kind were scratching their heads over some difficulty with a connection collar. "You are well this trip, *mahe?*"

"Ah, Captain." Any well-dressed hani was "Captain" to a mahendo'sat, who would rather err by compliment than otherwise. But this one by his gilt teeth was likely the captain of his own freighter. "You trade?"

"Trade what?"

"What got?"

"Hai, *mahe*, what need?"

The mahendo'sat grinned, a brilliant golden flash, sharp-edged. No one, of course, began trade by admitting to necessity.

"Need a few less kif onstation," Pyanfar answered her own question, and the mahendo'sat whistled laughter and bobbed agreement.

"True, true," Goldtooth said somewhere between humor and outrage, as if he had a personal tale to tell. "Whining kif we wish you end of dock, good captain, honest captain. Ship *Kut* no good. *Hukan* more no good, and *Lukkur* same. But *Hinukku* made new kind deal no good. Wait at station, wait no, get same you course with *Hinukku*, good captain."

"What, *armed?*"

"Like hani, maybe." Goldtooth grinned when he said it, and Pyanfar laughed, pretended it a fine joke.

"Trade you two-hundredweight silk," Pyanfar offered.

"Station duty take all my profit."

"Ah. Too bad. —Hard work, that." She scuffed a foot toward the ailing collar. "I can lend you very good hani tools, fine steel, two very good hani welders, Faha House make."

"I lend you good quality artwork."

"Artwork!"

"Maybe someday great *mahen* artist, Captain."

"*Then* come to me; I'll keep my silk."

"Ah, ah, I make you favor with artwork, Captain, but no, I ask you take no chance. I have instead small number very fine pearl like you wear."

"Ah."

"Make you security for lend tools and welders. My man he come by you soon borrow tools. Show you pearl same time."

"Good." She grinned cheerfully, touched hand to hand with the thick-nailed *mahe* and strolled off, grinning still for all passersby to see; but the grin faded when she was past the ring of their cannisters and crossing the next berth.

So. Kif trouble had docked. There were kif and kif, and in that hierarchy of thieves, there were a few ship captains who tended to serve as ringleaders for high-stakes mischief; and some elect who were very great trouble indeed. Mahendo'sat

translation always had its difficulties, but it sounded uncomfortably like one of the latter. Stay in dock, the mahendo'sat had advised; don't chance putting out till it leaves. That was mahendo'sat strategy. It did not always work. She could keep *The Pride* at dock and run up a monstrous bill, and still have no guarantee of a safe course out, or she could pull out early and hope that the kif would *not* suspect what they had aboard —hope that the kif, at minimum, were waiting for something easier to chew than a mouthful of hani.

The docks looked all quiet ahead, up where *The Pride* had docked, her people working out by the loading belt as they should be doing, taking aboard the mail and the freight. The crew caught sight of her as she came, and of a sudden expressions took on desperate relief and ears pricked up, so that her heart clenched with foreknowledge of something direly wrong.

"Captain," Haral said quickly. "I got the things you ordered, put them in lowerdeck op, all of it; but there were kif everywhere I went, Captain, when I was off in the market. They were prowling about the aisles, staring at everyone, buying nothing. I finished my business and walked on back and they were still prowling about. So I ordered *her* Hilfy to go on in and send Tirun out here. There are kif nosing about *here* of a sudden."

"Doing what?"

"Look beyond my shoulder, Captain."

Pyanfar took a quick look, a shift of her eyes. "Nothing," she said. But cannisters were piled there at the section seal; twenty, thirty of them, each as tall as a hani and doublestacked, cover enough. She set her hand on Haral's shoulder, walked her companionably back to the others. "Hark, there's going to be a small stsho delivery and a mahendo'sat with a three-pearl deal; both are true . . . watch them both. But no others. There's one other hani ship docked far around the rim, next the methane docks. I've not spoken with them. It's *Handur's Voyager*."

"Small ship."

"And vulnerable. We're going to take *The Pride* out with all decent haste. I think it can only get worse here. Tirun: a small task; get to *Voyager*. I don't want to discuss the situation with them over com. Warn them that there's a ship in dock named *Hinukku* and the word is out among the mahendo'sat that this one is uncommonly bad trouble. And then get yourself back here fast. —No, wait. A good tool kit and two good welders: drop them with the crew of the *Mahijiru* and take the pearls in a hurry if you can get them. Seventh berth down. They'll deserve that and more if I've put the kif onto them by asking questions there. Go."

"Yes, Captain," Tirun breathed, and scurried off, ears back, up the service ramp beside the cargo belt.

Pyanfar cast a second look at the doublestacked cannisters in turning. A kif stood there, tall and black-robed, with a long, prominent snout and hunched stature. Pyanfar stared at it directly—*waved* to it with energetic and sarcastic camaraderie as she started toward it.

It stepped at once back into the shelter of the cannisters and the shadows. Pyanfar drew a great breath, flexed her claws and kept walking, round the curve of the cannister stacks and softly—face to face with the towering kif. The kif looked down on her with its red-rimmed dark eyes and long-nosed face and its dusty black robes like the robes of all other kif, of one tone with the gray skin . . . a bit of shadow come to life.

"Be off," she told it. "I'll have no cannister-mixing. I'm onto your tricks."

"Something of ours has been stolen."

She laughed, helped by sheer surprise. "Something of *yours* stolen, master thief? That's a wonder to tell at home."

"Best it find its way back to us. Best it should, Captain."

"I like to know who I'm talking to. Even among kif. I'll reckon you know my name, skulking about out here. What's yours?"

"Akukkakk is mine, Chanur captain. Pyanfar Chanur. Yes, we know you. Know you well, Captain. We have become *interested* in you . . . thief."

"Oho. Akukkakk of what ship?" Her vision sharpened on the kif, whose robes were marginally finer than usual, whose bearing had precious little kifish stoop in dealing with shorter species, that hunch of shoulders and thrusting forward of the head. This one looked at her from all its height. "I'd like to know you as well, kif."

"You will, hani. A last chance. We will redeem this prize you've found. I will make you that offer."

Her mustache-hairs drew down, as at some offensive aroma. "Interesting, if I had this item. Is it round or flat, this strayed object? Or did one of your own crew rob you, kif captain?"

"You know its shape, since you have it. Give it up, and be paid. Or don't—and be paid, hani, be paid then too."

"Describe this item to me."

"For its safe return—gold, ten bars of gold, fine. Contrive your own descriptions."

"I shall bear it in mind, kif, should I find something unusual and kif-smelling. But so far nothing."

"Dangerous, hani."

"What ship, kif?"

"*Hinukku.*"

"I'll remember your offer. Indeed I will, master thief."

The kif said no more. Towered erect and silent. She aimed a dry spitting toward its feet and walked off, slow swagger.

*Hinukku*, indeed. A whole new kind of trouble, the mahendo'sat had said, and this surly kif or another *might* have seen . . . or talked to those who had seen. *Gold*, they offered. Kif . . . offered ransom; and no common kif, either, not that one. She walked with a prickling between her shoulderblades and a multiplying apprehension for Tirun, who was now a small figure walking off along the upcurving docks. No hope that the station authorities would do anything to prevent a murder . . . not one between kif and hani. The stsho's neutrality consisted of retreat, and their law in arbitrating after the fact. Hani might deal with the kif and teach them a lesson, but there was no profit in it, not until moments like this one. Divert every hani ship from profitable trade to kif-hunting? Madness too . . . until it was *The Pride* in question.

"Pack it up out here," she told her remaining crew when she reached them. "Get everything ready to break dock. I'm going to call Tirun back here. It's worse than I thought."

Pyanfar started off down the dock—old habit, not to run; a reserve of pride, of caution, of some instinct either good or ill. Still she did not run in front of witnesses. She widened her strides until some bystanders —stsho—did notice, and stared. She gained on Tirun. Almost, almost within convenient shouting distance of Tirun—and still a far, naked distance up the dock's upcurving course to reach *Handur's Voyager*. *Hinukku* sat at dock for Tirun to pass before she should come to the hani ship. But the mahendo'sat vessel *Mahijiru* was docked before that. If only Tirun handled that extraneous errand on the way . . . the logical thing to do with a heavy load under one arm. Surely it was the logical thing, even considering the urgency of the other message.

Ah. Tirun *did* stop at the mahendo'sat berth. Pyanfar breathed a gasp of relief, broke her own rule at the last moment and sprinted behind some cannisters, strode right into the gathering which had begun to close about Tirun. She clapped a startled mahendo'sat spectator on the arm, pulled it about and thrust her way through to Tirun, grabbed her arm without ceremony. "Trouble. Let's go, cousin."

"Captain," Goldtooth exclaimed from her right. "You come back make new bigger deal?"

"Never mind. The tools are a gift. Come *on*, Tirun."

"Captain," Tirun began, bewildered, being dragged back

through the gathering of mahendo'sat. Mahendo'sat gave way before them, their captain still following them with confused chatter about welders and pearls.

Kif. A blackclad half-ring of them appeared suddenly on the outskirts of the swirl of dark-furred mahendo'sat. Pyanfar had Tirun's wrist and pulled her forward.

"Look out!" Tirun cried suddenly. One of the kif had pulled a gun from beneath its robe.

"*Go!*" Pyanfar yelled, and they dived back among cursing and screaming mahendo'sat, out again through a melee of kif who had circled behind the cannisters. Fire popped after them.

Suddenly a shot came from the right hand. Tirun yelped and stumbled, limping wildly. More kif along the dockfront offices, one very tall and familiar. Akukkakk, with friends.

"Earless bastard!" Pyanfar shouted, grabbed Tirun afresh and kept going, dragged her behind the cannisters of another mahendo'sat ship in a hail of laser pops and the reek of burned plastic. Tirun sagged in shock—a curse and a jerk on the arm got her running again, desperately: the burn ruptured and bled. They darted across an open space, having no choice.

A second shout roared out from before them; another flash from guns, multicolor, at *The Pride*'s berth: *The Pride*'s crew was returning fire, high for their sakes but meaning business.

And Hilfy was out there, fourth in that line of their own guns—laying down a berserk pattern of fire. Pyanfar dragged Tirun through that line of four by the scruff of the neck. "*Board!*" she yelled at the others with the last of her wind, and herself skidded on the decking in turning for the rampway. "Come *on*," she shouted at Geran and Chur; and the moment they retreated within, still firing, she hit the door seal. The massive steel clanged and thumped shut.

"Move," Pyanfar said. Haral took Tirun up in her arms and outright carried her, no small load. They withdrew up the rampway curve into their own lock, sealed *that* door and felt somewhat safer.

"Captain," Chur said, businesslike, "all lines are loose and cargo ramp is disengaged. In case."

"Well done," Pyanfar said, vastly relieved to hear it. They walked through the airlock and round the bend into the main lower corridor. "Secure the Outsider; sedate it all the way. You—" She looked aside at Tirun, who was trying to walk again with an arm across her sister's shoulders. "Get a wrap on that leg fast. No time for anything more. We're getting loose. I don't imagine *Hinukku* will stand still for this and I don't want kif passing my tail while

we're nose-to-station. Everyone rig for maneuvers."

Pyanfar sat down in her cushion in the center of a bank of vid screens and started turning on systems. Station was squalling stsho language protests, objections, outrage. "Get on that," Pyanfar said to her niece without missing a beat in switch-flicking. "Tell station we're cutting loose and they'll have to cope with it."

A delay. Hilfy relayed the message in limping stsho, ignoring the mechanical translator in her haste. "Station is mightily upset," she reported. "They demand to talk to you, aunt; they threaten not to let us dock at stsho—"

"Never mind the stsho." Pyanfar flicked from image to image on scan. She spotted another ship loose, in about the right location for *Hinukku*. Abruptly the scan acquired all kinds of flitter on it, chaff more than likely, as *Hinukku* screened itself to do something. "Gods rot them." She reached madly for controls and got *The Pride* reoriented gently enough to save the bones of those aboard who might not yet be secured for maneuvers . . . warning enough for those below to dive for security. "If they fire on us they'll take out half the station. Gods!" She hit general com. "Brace; we're backing hard."

She put *The Pride* into a slow axis rotation, gambling that the kif would not come underside of station in so obvious a place as the one in line with last-known position. "Watch scan," she warned Hilfy, diverting herself to monitor the op board half a heartbeat, to see all the telltales were what they ought to be. "*Haral, get up here.*"

Running feet in the corridor. Haral was with them. Hilfy started to yield her place at scan; Haral slid into the third seat, adjusted the restraints.

"Captain, they hit station." Haral's voice was incredulous. "They *fired*."

"*Handur's Voyager.*" Pyanfar had the origin mapped on the station torus and made the connection. "O gods." She hit repulse and sent them hurtling to station core shadow, tilted their nose with a second burst, and cut in main thrust, shooting them nadir of station, nose for infinity. Pyanfar uncapped a red switch, hit it, and *The Pride* rocked with explosion.

"What was *that?*" Hilfy's voice. "Are we hit?"

"I just dumped our holds." Pyanfar sucked air, an expansion of her nostrils. Her claws flexed out and in on the toggle-grip. Gee was hauling at them badly. *The Pride of Chanur* was in full rout, she having just altered their mass/drive ratio, stripped for running. "Haral, get us a course."

"Working," Haral said. Numbers started coming up on the

comp screen at Pyanfar's left.

"Going to have to find us a quiet spot."

"Urtur's just within single-jump range," Haral said, "stripped as we are. Maybe."

She livened another board, bringing up jump-graphs. Urtur. That was the way they had come in, two jumps and loaded—a very large system where mahendo'sat did a little mining, a little manufacture, and licensed others. They *might* make that distance in one jump now; kif were not following . . . yet. Did not have to follow. They could figure possible destinations by dumped mass and the logic of the situation. *O my brother,* she thought, wondering how she would face Kohan. He would be affected by this disgrace, this outrage of lost cargo, of flight while a hani ship perished stationbound and helpless. Kohan Chanur might be broken by it; it might tempt young males to challenge him. And there were enough challenges, and often enough. . . .

The alarm started, a slow wailing through the ship. *The Pride* leaped forward by her generation pulses, borrowed velocity at the interface, whipped into the between. Pyanfar dug her claws in, decades accustomed to this, did that mental wrench which told lies to the inner ears, and kept her balance. *Come on,* she willed the ship, as if intent alone could take it that critical distance further.

*The Pride* came in, a sluggish, nightmare arrival, pulsed out and in again, a flickering of jump-distorted instruments which showed them far out on the Urtur range, not close enough to pick up more than an indication of a stellar mass.

Near miss. They had stretched it as far as it could be stretched.

"We're dumping down to systemic drift velocity," Pyanfar said on allship. "Possibly the kif stayed to sort through what we jettisoned, but they'll be here in short order. Or they're already here . . . with likely more kif here to help them. I'll be very surprised otherwise. We've shut down all transmission, all scan output. No use of the main engines either."

Pyanfar put *The Pride* into synch with the general rotation of the system, one with the debris and the rock and gas which made Urtur, spread out over the orbits of ten planets and fifty-seven major moons and uncounted planetoids and smaller hazards, one of the more difficult systems for the rapid passage of any ship into its central plane. *The Pride* was picking up decayed signal from a mahendo'sat installation further in . . . at least that station should be the origin of it, chatter meaningless not only in the distance but in elapsed time since its sending. Some might be scatter from ships operating in the sys-

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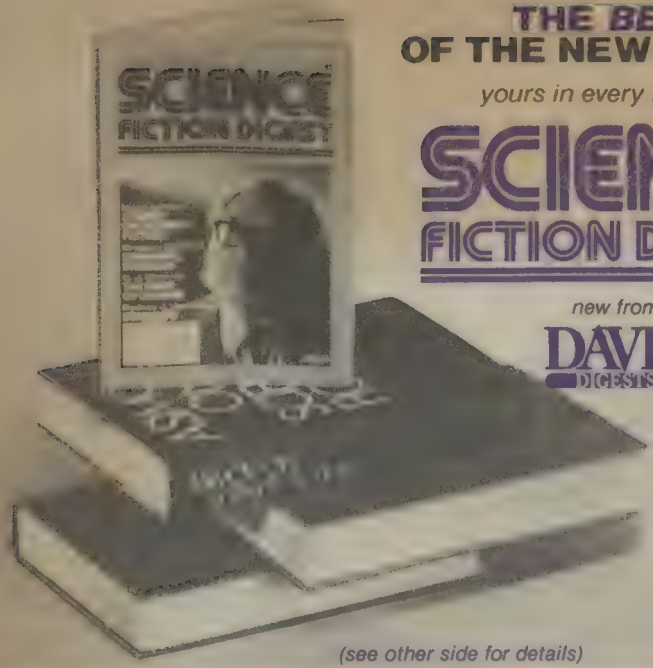


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tem, traders, countless miners in ships of all sizes from the great ore-carriers down to singleseat skimmers. In due course they themselves ought to announce presence and identity, but she had no intention of doing so. There was an excellent chance that their arrival had been far beyond the capacity of the longest scan from outsystem relay, and she saw no profit in bringing the mahendo'sat of Urtur in on a private quarrel with the kif. The kif could have arrived days ago, bypassing them in the *between*, which could happen with a more powerful ship—system chatter might reveal that. She kept listening to it with one ear, finished up the dump, pulling them finally into trim, hoping her position was what she thought it was.

Pyanfar heaved her aching body out of the cushion, staggered around the dividing console to put her hand on the back of Haral's cushion. "Put the pagers in link," she told Haral. "We receive signal; we don't send; we don't maneuver. We don't do anything now but drift."

"Aye." Haral knew the game; they had done it a time or two, this prolonged dark silence, waiting out a kif or an unknown—but not in Urtur's debris-cluttered field, not where other ships were likely and collision was possible. Haral knew. It was Hilfy for whom she offered instructions.

Pyanfar took her own pager from the wall by the exit and went back to give one to Hilfy, who was leaning against the counter, nostrils slitted and ears laid back. Pyanfar clapped her on the shoulder and thrust the pager into her hand. "Out. Go. Everything's about to go under automatic here, and there's nothing you can do."

## III

Their uninvited passenger had settled after jump—cocooned in blankets and sedated for the trip, now let go again, to huddle in that heap of blankets in the corner of the washroom. Pyanfar found him curled into a knot, a blanket thrown over his head. She dropped to her haunches, put out a forefinger and traced numbers from one to eight on the flooring. Looked up from time to time at the creature, who watched her. It reached out of its nest of blankets and made tentative movements of writing on the floor, drew back the arm and watched what she was doing until she stopped at sixteen. It tucked the blankets more closely about itself and stared from bleak, blue eyes. Washed, it looked better. The mane and beard were even beautiful, silken, pollen-gold. But the naked arm outthrust from the blankets bore ugly bruises of fingered grips. There had been a lot of bruises under the dirt, she

reckoned. It had a reason for its attitude. It was not docile now, just weak.

She stood up, hearing footsteps in the hallway. It was Geran and Chur, and Hilfy, carrying the mahendo'sat teaching manual and symbol translator Haral had picked up at Meetpoint. "I trust the translator made it intact," Pyanfar said.

"It's fine," said Hilfy.

"So let's try that. Can you set it up?"

"I learned on one."

"Do it," Pyanfar said, and motioned to Geran and Chur. "Get it on its feet. Be gentle."

Hilfy hurried off. Geran and Chur moved in carefully and Pyanfar stepped out of the way, thinking it might turn violent, but it did not. It stood up docilely as they patted it and assisted it to its feet. It was naked, and *he* was a reasonable guess, Pyanfar concluded, watching it make a snatch after the blankets about its feet, while Chur carefully unlocked the chain they had padded about its ankle, Geran holding onto its right arm. Pyanfar frowned, disturbed to be having a male on the ship, with all the thoughts *that* stirred up. Chur and Geran were being uncommonly courteous with it, and that was already a hazard.

"Look sharp," Pyanfar said. "Take it to the op room and mind what you're doing."

The Outsider balked of a sudden in the doorway, and Chur and Geran patted its hairless shoulders and let it think about it a long moment, which seemed the right tack to take. It stood a very long moment, looked either way down the corridor, seemed frozen, but then at a new urging—"Come on," Geran said in the softest possible voice and tugged very slightly—the Outsider decided to cooperate and let itself be led into the hall and on toward operations.

They brought it into the op room. It let itself be put into one of the cushions at the dead cargo-monitor console, near the counter where Hilfy worked over the translator, running a series of figures over the screen. Pyanfar walked up to the arm of the cushion; its head came up instantly at her presence and wariness came into its eyes. More than wariness. Fear. It remembered who had hurt it. It knew them as individuals, past a clothing change. That at least.

"Hai," Pyanfar said in her best friend-to-Outsiders manner, patted its hairless, sweating shoulder, swept Hilfy aside in her approach to the translator. She pushed *Wipe*, clearing Hilfy's figures, then the *Bipedal Sentient* button, with a stick figure of a long-limbed being spreadeagled on it. The same figure appeared on the screen. She pushed the next, which showed a hani in photographic image, and indicated herself.

It understood. Its eyes were bright with anxiety. It clutched its blanket tighter and made a faltering attempt to stand, reaching toward the machine.

"Let it loose," Pyanfar said, and Chur helped it up. It ignored them all, leaned on the counter and poised a trembling hand over the keyboard. The whole arm shook. It punched a button.

Ship. It looked up, its eyes seeking understanding.

Pyanfar carefully took its alien hand—oh, so carefully, but it allowed the touch. She extended its forefinger and guided it to the *Wipe* button, back to the ship button again. It freed its hand and searched, the hand shaking violently as it passed above the keys. *Figure Running*, it keyed. *Ship. Figure Running. Ship* again. *Hani. Wipe.*

"Yes," she said, recognizing the statement. Motioned for it to do more.

It turned again, made another search of the keys. *Figure Supine*, it stated. It found the pictorial for kif. That long-snouted gray face lit the screen beside the figure supine.

"Kif," Pyanfar said.

It understood. That was very clear. "Kif," it echoed. It had a voice full of vibrant sounds, like purring. It was strange to hear it articulate a familiar word . . . hard to pick that word out when the tongue managed neither the kif click nor the hani cough. And the look in its eyes now was more than apprehensive. Wild.

Pyanfar put her claws out and demonstratively rested her hand over the image. Pushed *Wipe.* She put the hani symbol back on, punched in voice-record; *hani*, the audio proclaimed, in hani mode. She picked up the cheap mike and spoke for the machine's study-tape, with the machine recording her voice. "Hani." She called up another image. "Stand." A third. "Walk."

It took a little repetition, but the Outsider began to involve itself in the process and not in its trembling hysteria over the kif image. It started with the first button . . . worked at the system, despite its physical weakness; recorded its own identification for all the simple symbols on the first row, soberly, with no joy in its discovery, but not sluggishly either. It began to go faster and faster; jabbed keys, spoke, one after the other, madly rapid, as if it were proving something. There were seventy-six keys on that unit and it ran through the lot, although toward the end its hand was hardly controllable.

"It's gone its limit," Pyanfar said. "Get it some water."

Chur brought water from the dispenser. The Outsider accepted it one-handed, sniffed the paper cup, then drained it. It gave the empty cup back, pointed at itself, then at the ma-

chine on the counter, looked at Pyanfar, correctly assessing who was in charge. It wanted —Pyanfar read the gestures—to continue.

"Hilfy," Pyanfar said, "the manual, on the counter. Give it here."

Hilfy handed it over. Pyanfar searched through the opening pages for the precise symbols of the module in the machine at present. "How many of those modules do we have?"

"Ten. Two manuals."

"That ought to carry us into abstracts." She set the opened book into the Outsider's lap and pointed at the symbols it had just done, showed it how far the section went. Now it made the connection. It gathered the book against itself with both arms, intent on keeping it.

"Yes," Pyanfar said, and nodded confirmation.

She looked at Hilfy, at Geran and Chur, whose expressions were guarded. They well knew now what level of sentient they had aboard. How much they guessed of their difficulties with the kif was another matter: a lot, she reckoned—they picked up things out of the air, assembled them themselves without having to ask. "A passenger compartment," she said. "I think it might like clothes. Food and drink. Its book. Clean bedding and a bed to sleep in. *Civilized* facilities. That doesn't mean you shouldn't be careful with it. Let's move it and let it rest."

It looked from Chur to Geran as the two closed in, grew distressed when Chur took its arm to get it on its feet. It pointed back at the machine . . . wanted its chance to communicate. Perhaps there was more it planned to say, in the symbols. Pyanfar reached and touched its shoulder from the other side, touched the book it held and pressed its hand the tighter against it, indicating it should keep the book, the best promise she could think of that might tell it they were not done with talking. It calmed itself, let itself be drawn to its feet and, once steadied, led out.

Pyanfar looked at the machine on the counter, walked over and turned it off. Hilfy was still standing there. "Move the whole rig," Pyanfar said. "We'll risk the equipment." She unplugged the keyboard module, which was no burden at all, but awkward. "Bring the screen."

She followed after the Outsider and Chur and Geran, down the side corridor to one of the three rooms they kept for *The Pride*'s occasional paying passengers, up the curve into the area of the crew's private quarters. They were nicely appointed cabins. The one Chur and Geran had selected was in fresh greens with woven grass for the walls and with the bed and chairs in pale lime.

And the Outsider seemed to recognize a major change in its

fortunes. It stood in the center of the room clutching its book and its blanket and staring about with a less sullen expression than before . . . seemed rather dazed by it all, if its narrow features were at all readable. Then it saw the translator hookup sitting on the counter, and its eyes flickered with interest.

Not joy. There was never that.

It said something. Two distinct words. For a moment it sounded as if it were speaking its own language. And then it sounded vaguely kif. Pyanfar's ears pricked up and she drew in a breath. "Say again," she urged.

"Kif . . . companion?"

"*No.*" She drew a deeper breath. "Bastard! You *do* understand." And again in kif: "Who are you? What kind are you?"

It shook its head, seeming helpless. Evidently *who* was not part of its repertoire. Pyanfar considered the anxious Outsider thoughtfully, reached and set her hand on Chur's convenient shoulder. "This is Chur," she said in kif. And in hani: "Do me a great favor, cousin: you sit with this Outsider on your watch. You keep him going on those identifications, change modules the minute you've got one fully identified, the audio track filled. Keep him at it while he will, but don't force him. You know how to work it?"

"Yes," Chur said.

"You be careful. No knowing what it's thinking, what it's been through; and I don't put deviousness beyond its reach either. I want it communicative; don't be rough with it, don't frighten it. But don't put yourself in danger either. —Geran, you stay outside, do your operations monitor by pager so long as Chur's inside, hear?"

"Clearly understood."

"Hilfy." Pyanfar motioned to her niece and started out the door.

"Aunt," Hilfy said.

Pyanfar looked back.

"What shall we do with it?"

"I'm sure I don't know," Pyanfar said.

"I'd take some of the slack; I'd help, if I knew what to do. With the cargo gone—"

Pyanfar frowned. *You want to relieve me of worry?* she thought. *Then don't do anything stupid.* But there was that face, young and proud and wanting to do well. Most that Hilfy knew how to do on the ship had gone when cargo blew and scan shut down. "Youngster, I've gotten into a larger game than I planned, and there's no going home until we've gotten it straightened out. How we do that is another question, because the kif know our name. Have you got an idea you've been sitting on?"

"No, aunt—being ignorant about too much."

Pyanfar nodded. "So with myself, niece. Let it be a lesson to you. My situation precisely, when I took the Outsider in, in-

stead of handing it right back to the kif."

"We couldn't have given him to them."

"No," Pyanfar agreed heavily. "But it would certainly have been more convenient." She shook her head. "Go rest, whelp. You'll be lagging when I do need you. And need you I will."

She walked on into the bridge. Hilfy did not follow. Pyanfar sat down at her place, among all the dead instruments, called up all the record which had flowed in while she was gone, listening to that with one ear and the current comflow with the other.

Bad news. A second arrival in the system . . . more than one ship. It might be kif, might be someone else from the disaster at Meetpoint Station. In either case it was bad. The ones already here were on the hunt beyond question—kif were upset enough to have dumped cargo to get here from Meetpoint; no other ships had cause to hunt *The Pride*, or to call them thief. They were the same kif, beyond doubt, upset enough to have banded together in a hunt. Bad news all the way.

Urtur Station was into the comflow now . . . bluster, warning the kif of severe penalties and fines. That was old chatter, from the beginning of the trouble, a wavefront just now reaching them. Threats from the kif—those were more current.

"Someone's jumped, Captain."

Tirun's voice, out of the com unit. Pyanfar dumped a complex calculation from her mind and reached for the reply bar. "Who? Where?"

"Just got the characteristic ghost, that's all. I don't know. It was farside of system and long ago. No further data, but it fits within our timeline. That close."

"Give me the image." Tirun passed it onto the screen. Nadir range and badly muddled pickup; there was too much debris in the way.

"Right," she said to Tirun, and stared morosely at the charts and the figures which, no matter how twisted, kept coming up the same: that there was no way to singlejump beyond Urtur, however reduced in mass they were now.

That jump-ghost which had just arrived might have been someone successfully running for it. More ships than that one might have jumped from here, lost in the gas and debris of Urtur's environs.

But quite, quite likely that ship was kif, a surplus ship moving on to arrange ambush at the most logical jump point that they might use.

Rot Akukkakk. She recalled the flat black eyes, red-rimmed, the long gray face, the voice very different from the whining tone of lesser kif. A bitter taste came into her mouth.

How many of them? she wondered, and pulled the scattered charts toward her on the desk and thought like a kif, wondering where he might station his ships remaining at Urtur, having figured now, as he must have, what they were up to.

Four kif ships had been at Meetpoint. Some or all might have come with him. There might have been as many more at Urtur when *Hinukku* came in. Eight ships, say. Not beyond possibility.

Huh. So. She at least knew their options—or the lack of them. It was a thoroughly bad game to have gotten into. She levered her aching body out of the chair it had occupied too many hours.

From the main section of the com board, outside transmission buzzed, whined, lapsed into a long convolute series of wails and spine-ruffling pipings. She jumped in spite of herself, sat down, keyed in the translator on com. *Knnn,* the screen informed her, which she already knew. *Song. No recognizable identity. No numerical content. Range: insufficient input.*

*That* kind frequented Urtur too, miners who worked without lifesupport in the methane hell of the moon Uroji and found it home. Odd folk in all senses: many-legged nests of hair, black and hating the light. They came to a station to dump ores and oddments, and to snatch furtively at whatever trade was in reach before scuttling back into the darknesses of their ships. The knnn sang, irrationally; pleased with themselves, or lovelorn, or speaking a language. No one knew. There was nothing unusual in knnn presence here; a creature straying where it would, oblivious to oxygen-breather quarrels.

The deadness of the instruments depressed her spirits. They were out here drifting with kif and rocks and a knnn who had no idea of the matters at issue.

"Captain," Tirun's voice broke in.

"Hearing you."

"Got a knnn out there."

"Hearing that too. What are Hilfy and Haral doing about the Outsider?"

"He's not making any trouble."

"They're to bring him up here. Keep your ear to the outside comflow; going to be busy up here."

"Yes, Captain."

The link broke off. Pyanfar dialed the pager to pick up the translator channel, received the white-sound of hani words. Everything seemed quiet. Eventually she heard the lift in operation, and heard steps in the corridor leading to the bridge.

He came like an apparition against the brighter corridor light beyond, tall and angular, with two hani shapes close behind

him. He walked hesitantly into the dimness of the bridge itself.

"Come ahead," Pyanfar urged him further, and rose from her place to sit braced against the comp console, arms folded. The Outsider still had a sickly look, wobbly on his feet, but she reached back to key the lock on comp, which could only be coded free again, then looked back again at the Outsider . . . who was looking not at her, but about him at the bridge with an expression of longing, of—whatever feeling someone might have who had lately lost the freedom of such places.

He came from a ship, then, she thought. He must have.

He wore the pager at his waist, had gotten the audio plug into his ear, however uncomfortable it might be for him. Pyanfar reached up and tightened her own, dialed the pager to receive, looked back at him from her perch against the counter. "All right?" she asked him, and his face turned toward her. "You do understand," she said. "That translator works both ways. You can speak and make us understand you. Do you want to sit down? Please do."

He felt after the bend of the cushion and sank down on the arm of it.

"Better," Pyanfar said. "What's your name, Outsider?"

Lips tautened. No answer.

"Listen to me," Pyanfar said evenly. "Since you came onto my ship, I've lost my cargo and hani have died—killed by the kif. Does that come through to you? I want to know who you are, where you came from, and why you ran to my ship when you could have gone to any other ship on the dock. So you tell me. Who are you? Where do you come from? What do you have to do with the kif and why my ship, Outsider?"

"You're not friends to the kif."

Loud and clear. Pyanfar drew in a breath, thrust her hands into her waistband before her, and regarded the Outsider with a pursed-lip smile. "So. *Well.* No, we've said so; I'm not working for the kif and I'm no friend of theirs. I want an answer, Outsider. Why did you come to us and not to another ship?"

He looked at her with a thoughtful gnawing of a lip, a movement finally which might be a shrug. "You sit far from the kif ship. And you laugh."

"Laugh?"

He made a vague gesture back toward Hilfy and Haral. "Your crew work outside the ship, they laugh. They tell me go, go #### no weapons toward me. ### I come back ###."

"Into the rampway, you mean." Pyanfar frowned. "So. What did you plan to do in my ship? To steal? To take weapons? Is that what you wanted?"

"##### no ####."

"Slower. Speak slower for the

translator. What did you want on the ship?"

He drew a deep breath, shut his eyes briefly as if trying to collect words or thoughts. "I don't ask weapons. I see the rampway . . . here with hani, small afraid."

"Less afraid of us, were you?" She was hardly flattered. "What's your name? *Name*, Outsider."

"Tully," he said.

"Tully," she repeated; he nodded. She touched her own chest. "Pyanfar Chanur is my name. The translator can't do names for you. Py-an-far. Chanur."

He tried. Pyanfar was recognizable . . . at least that he purred the rhythm into his own tongue. "Good enough," she said. She sat more loosely, linked her hands in her lap. "Civilized. Civilized beings should deal with names. Tully. —Are you from a ship, Tully, or did the kif take you off some world?"

He thought about that. "Ship," he admitted finally.

"Did you shoot at them first? Did you shoot at the kif first, Tully?"

"*No.* No weapons. My ship have no weapons."

"Gods, that's no way to travel. What should I do with you? Take you back to what world, Tully?"

His hands tightened on the back of the cushion. He stared at her bleakly past it. "You want same they want. I don't say."

"You come onto my ship and you won't tell me. Hani are dead because of you, and you won't tell me."

"Dead."

"Kif hit a hani ship. They wanted you, Tully. They wanted you. Don't you think I should ask questions? This is my ship. You came to it. Don't you think you owe me some answers?"

He said nothing. Meant to say nothing, that was clear. His shoulders sagged and he made a vague motion of his hand about their surroundings. "Where are we? The sound . . ."

The dust brushing past the hull. It had been background noise, a maddening whisper they lived with. Down in lowerdeck, he would have heard a lot of it. "We're drifting," she said. "Rocks and dust out there."

"We sit at a jump point?"

"Star system. The system is uninhabited except for mahendo'sat miners and a few knnn and tc'a who think the place is pleasant. Methane breathers. But a lot of miners, a lot of people of all kinds are in danger right now. Urtur is the name of the star. And the kif are in there somewhere. They followed us when we jumped to this place, and now a lot of people are in danger because of you. Kif are there, you understand?"

"Authority." His skin was cold under her fingerpads, his

muscles hard and shivering, whether from the relative chill of the bridge's open spaces or from some other cause. "Authority of this system. Hani?"

"Mahendo'sat station. They don't like the kif much either. No one does, but it's not possible to get rid of them. Mahendo'sat, kif, hani, tc'a, stsho, knnn, chi . . . all trade here. We don't all like each other, but we keep to ourselves."

He listened, silent, for whatever he could understand of what she said. Com sputtered again, the whistles and wailing of the knnn.

"Some of them," Pyanfar said, "are stranger than you. But you don't know the names, do you? This whole region of space is strange to you."

"Far from my world," he said.

"Is it?"

That got a misgiving look from him. He pulled away, looked at her and at the others.

"Wherever it is," Pyanfar said in nonchalance. She looked back at Haral and Hilfy. "I think that's about enough. Our passenger's tired. He can go back to his quarters."

"I want talk you," Tully said. He took hold of the cushion nearest, resisting any attempt to move him. His pale eyes were intent and wild, and whatever the precise emotion his face registered, he was distraught. "You #### me. Work, understand. I stay this ship and I work same crew. All you want. Where you go. # give me ###."

"Huh." She thrust her hands within her waistband and would have looked down her nose at him, but it was a matter of looking up. "You make a deal, do you? You work for me, Outsider? You do what I say? All right. You rest now. You go learn your words and you think how to tell me what the kif want with you—because the kif still want this ship, you understand. They want you, and they'll come after this ship."

He thought about that a moment. Almost he looked as if he might speak. His lips shaped a word and took it back again, and clamped shut. And something sealed in behind his eyes when he did that, a bleakness worse than had ever been there. It sent a prickle down her spine. *This creature is thinking of dying,* she thought. "Tully. You aren't strong enough yet to work. Enough that you rest. You're safe. You understand me? Hani don't trade with kif."

There was a glimmering then, a sudden break in that seal. He reached out quite unexpectedly and seized her hand, his blunt fingers both holding and exploring it, the furred web he lacked, the pads of the tips. To her further distress he set his other hand on her shoulder. Crazy, she judged him; and then she thought about kif, and reckoned that he had license for

a little strangeness.

"I'll tell you something," she said, "for free. Kif followed you across the Meetpoint dock to my ship; they followed my ship here to Urtur; and right now we're sitting here, just trying to be quiet so the kif don't find us. Trying to decide how best to get out of here. There's one kif in particular, in command of a ship named *Hinukku*. Akukkakk . . ."

"*Akukkakk*," he echoed, suddenly rigid.

"Ah. You do know."

"He want take me his ship. Big one. Authority."

"Very big. They have a word for his kind, do you know it? *Hakkikt*. That means he hunts and others pick up the scraps he leaves. I lost something at Meetpoint: a hani ship and my cargo. So did this great *hakkikt*, this great, this powerful kif. You escaped him. *You* ran from him. So it's more than profit that he wants out of this. He wants *you*, Tully, to settle accounts. It's his pride at stake, his reputation. For a kif, that's life itself. He's not going to give up. Do you know, he tried to buy you from me. He offered me gold, a lot of gold. He might even have kept the deal straight and not delayed for piracy afterward. He's that desperate."

Tully's eyes drifted from her to the others and back again. "You deal with him?"

"No. I want something for dead hani and lost cargo. I want this great *hakkikt*. You hear me, Tully?"

"Yes," Tully said suddenly. "*I* want same."

"Aunt," Hilfy protested in a faint voice.

"You want to work," Pyanfar said, ignoring her niece's disquiet. "There'll be the chance for that. But you wait, Tully. You rest. At shift change, I'll call you again. You come eat with us. Meal, understand? But you get some rest first, hear? You work on my ship, you take orders first. Follow instructions. Right?"

He nodded, delivered himself over to Haral and Hilfy: not a backward look from either of them as they took him out. Or from him. She watched them go, found herself rubbing the hand that he had touched.

Revenge was something of purpose, something to make life worthwhile. She had offered him that. No disengagement possible. Not with this kif prince, this *hakkikt* Akukkakk, whose personal survival rode on this Outsider business. His own sycophants would turn on him if he lost face in this matter. Akukkakk would have been obliged to revenge if it were so much as a bauble stolen from him at dockside. But this Outsider Tully was far more than that. A communicative, spacefaring species, hitherto unknown, in a position to have come into kif hands without passing through

more civilized regions. The kif had new neighbors.

Possible danger to them.

Possible expansion of kif hunting grounds . . . in directions which had nothing to do with hani and mahendo'sat. Those were high stakes, impossibly high stakes to be riding on one poor fugitive.

Urtur would swarm with kif, before all was said and done.

## IV

It was a monster, like Tully, this thing that they constructed in the spotlit, chill bowels of *The Pride*'s far rim. It had started out hani-shaped, a patched and hazardous EVA-pod which they had stripped for parts and never succeeded in foisting off on another hani ship. Under their tinkering its limbs had just grown longer, spliced with tubing, and it was rigged with a wheezing lifesupport system.

It stood like some mahendo'sat demon, two limbs shy of that description, but ghastly enough in its exposed hoses and its malproportioned height against the dark of the surrounding machine-shop. A reek of blood mingled with the singed-smell of the welding. A bucket on the deck caught the occasional drip from the skinned carcass which hung beyond it under the light. It was a little more than hani-sized, chained up to the hoist-track above to thaw and drain. It had begun to reek under the lights. The long limbs were coming untucked, and the belly gaped. *Uruus.* Sweet meat and a fat one.

The door unsealed and sealed in the dark distance; steps whispered along the metal flooring. Pyanfar could see the lights go on in the far dark expanse, picking out two figures, one gangling tall and pale. She sat and waited as the lights turned themselves on and off in sequence along the walkway, bringing the two nearer and nearer where she sat.

Tully and Chur, of course. The Outsider stopped dead when he came close, and the light went out on him, leaving him and Chur in the dark. "Tully, it's safe," she said. "Come on. It's all right, Tully."

He did come, slowly, alien shadow in the rest of the strangeness, and Chur had hold of his arm, in case. He looked at the vacant suit and at the hanging carcass, and kept staring at it.

"Animal," Pyanfar said. "Tully. I want you to see what we're doing. I want you to understand. Hear?"

He turned toward her, eyes deep in their shadowed sockets. "You put me in this?"

"Put *that* in the suit," Pyanfar said cheerfully. "Transmitter sending signal hard as it can. We tell the kif that we're throwing you out and we give them

*that*, you understand, Outsider? And we run."

It began to get through to him. His eyes flickered over the business again, the vacant suit, the frozen carcass. "Their instruments see in it," he said.

"Their instruments will scan it, yes; and that's what they'll get."

He gestured toward the carcass. "This? This?"

"Food," she said. "Not a person, Tully. Animal. Food."

Of a sudden his face took on an alarming grin. His body heaved with a choking sound she realized finally for laughter. He clapped Chur on the shoulder, turned that convulsed face toward her with moisture streaming from his eyes and still with that mahendo'sat grin. "You # the kif."

"Put that inside," she told him, motioning toward the carcass. "Bring it. You help, Tully."

He did, with Chur, his rangy body straining against the half-frozen weight, an occasional grimace of what might be disgust at the look or the feel of it. There was trim work to do. She abandoned fastidiousness and did it herself, having some notion how it might fit. The head could be gotten into the helmet, a bit of the neck to stuff the vacant body cavity of the carcass, and a little scoring and breaking of the rib cage, a sectioning and straightening of stiff limbs.

"Going to smell good if that drifts a while with the heater on," Chur observed. Tully laughed his own choking laugh and wiped his face, smearing his mustache with the muck which coated his arms to the elbow. Pyanfar grinned, suddenly struck with the incongruity of things, squatting in the dark with a crazed alien and a suit full of uruus carcass, the three of them in insane conspiracy.

"Come," she said, taking the feet.

"Cargo dump?" Chur asked.

"Airlock," Pyanfar said. "Should passengers leave a ship by any other route?"

Supper was on. It was a real meal this time. Pyanfar grinned inside and out at the sight: the table lengthened so that it hardly gave them room to edge around it, the center spread with fantastical culinary artistry, platters of meat, by the gods; gravies and sauces in which tidbits floated, garnished with herbs.

"Wondrous," Pyanfar pronounced it, inhaling. Places for seven. She heard the lift and looked toward the corridor. In short order came Haral and Chur with Tully in tow, and Tirun limped along behind them. "Sit, sit," Pyanfar bade them. Pyanfar made the healthwish, which got the response of the others and startled Tully by its loudness. Then she poured gfi from her own flask by her cup; the

whole company reached for theirs and did the same, Tully imitating them belatedly, and for a moment there was nothing but the clatter of knives and cups and plates as Geran's and Hilfy's monuments underwent swift demolition. Tully took snatches of this and that as the dishes circled past him on the table's rotating center, small helpings at first, as if he were not sure what he had a right to, and larger ones as he darted furtive glances at what others took, and ladled on sauces and laid by small puddles of this and that in the evident case it might not come round a second time. No questions from him.

"Good?" Pyanfar broke the general silence.

"Yes," Tully said. "I'm hungry." *Hungry*, the translator said into her ear, dispassionately; but the look on his face for a moment put a great deal more into it.

"Says he's cold most of the time," Chur said. "He doesn't have our natural covering, after all. I tried a jacket on him, but he's too big. He still wants it, asks to cut it. Maybe better to start with something of Haral's in the first place."

"Cold," Tully said, in his limited understanding of the discussion.

"We're trying, Tully," Chur said. "I ask Haral, understand. Maybe find you something."

The com broke in, a knnn-song, and Tully jumped. Everyone looked up reflexively toward the speaker, and Pyanfar drew a deep breath when knnn was all it turned out to be. Tully alone kept staring that way.

"That's nothing," Pyanfar said. "Knnn again. It'll shut up in a moment." She looked soberly at the others, now that business was on her mind. "Got ourselves a course laid, in case. It's in the comp when we need it. And we will. Got ourselves a decoy rigged too, Chur and Tully and I—a gift for the kif that's going to cost them critical speed if they want to pick it up; got it fixed so it'll look good to their sensors."

There was a moment's silence.

"All right to talk?" Hilfy asked.

Pyanfar nodded without comment.

"Where?" Hilfy asked. "If we're running—where? Meetpoint again?"

"No. I considered that, to be sure: throwing the kif off by that. But figuring it and refiguring—we came close enough not making it when we came in with all Urtur's mass to fix on; and there's not a prayer of doing it in reverse with only Meetpoint's little mass to bring us up. I've worked posible courses over and over again, and there's nothing for it—twojump, to Kirdu. It's a big station; and there's help possible there."

"The kif," said Geran, "will

have it figured too. They'll intercept us at Kita."

"So we string the jumps," Pyanfar said, taking a sip of gfi. "Consecutive jump. No delay for recovery time, no velocity dump in the interval, and gods know, a hazard where we're going: we're bound to boost some of this debris through with us. But the risk is still better than sitting here while the kif population increases. There's one jump point we have to make: Kita. Past Kita Point, the kif have to take three guesses where we went—Jura, Kirdu, Maing Tol. They might guess right after all, but they still might disperse some ships to cover other possibilities."

"Pyanfar." Tully spoke, holding his cup as if he had forgotten it, something obviously welling up in him which wanted saying. "I talk?" he asked. And when Pyanfar nodded: "What move make this ship?"

"Going closer to home territory, to hāni space. We're going where kif won't follow us so easily, and where there's too much hani and mahendo'sat traffic to make it easy for them to move against us. Better place, you understand. Safer."

He set down the cup, made a vague gesture of a flat-nailed, long-fingered hand. "Two jump."

"Yes."

"#. Need #, Captain. #."

He was sorely, urgently upset. Pyanfar drew in a breath, made a calming gesture. "Again, Tully. Say again. New way."

"*Sleep*. Need sleep in jump."

"Ah. Like the stsho. They have to, yes. I understand; you'll have your drugs, then, make you sleep, never fear."

He had started shaking. Of a sudden moisture broke from his eyes. He bowed his head and wiped at it, and was quiet for the moment. Everyone was, recognizing a profound distress. Perhaps he realized: he stirred in the silence and clumsily picked up his knife and jabbed at a bit of meat in his plate, carried it to his mouth and chewed, all without looking up.

"You need drugs to sleep," Pyanfar said, "and the kif took you through jump without them. That's what they did, was it?"

He looked up at her.

"Were you alone when you started, Tully? Were there others with you?"

"Dead," he said around the mouthful, and swallowed it with difficulty. "Dead."

"You know for sure."

"I'm sure."

"Did you talk to the kif? Did you tell them what they asked you?"

"No," Tully said, looked down again and up under his pale brows. "We give wrong # to their translator."

"He fouled their translator," Tirun exclaimed in delight. "Gods!"

"And not ours?" Pyanfar observed.

Tully's eyes sought hers.

"I thought you ran that board too quickly," Pyanfar said. "Clever Outsider. *We*, you said. Then there were more of you in the kif's hands at the start."

"The kif take four of us. They take us through jump with no medicine, awake, you understand; they give us no good food, not much water, make us work this translator keyboard same you have. We know what they want from us. We make slow work, make we don't understand the keyboard, don't understand the symbols, work all slow. They stand small time. They hit us, bad, push us, bad—make us work this machine, make quick. We work this machine all wrong, make many wrong words, this word for that word, long, long tape—some right, most wrong. One day, two, three—all wrong." His face contorted. "They work the tape and we make mistake more. They understand what we do, they take one of us, kill her. Hit us all, much. They give us again same work, make a tape they want. We make number-two tape wrong, different mistake. The kif kill second one my friends. I—man name Dick James—we two on the ship come to station. They make us know this Akukkakk; he come aboard ship see us. He—" Again a contortion of the face, a gesture. "He—take my friend arm, break it, break many time two arms, leg—I make fight him, do no good; he hit me—walk outside. And my friend—he ask—I kill him, you understand. I do it; I kill my friend, # kif no more hurt him."

The silence about the table was mortal. Pyanfar cleared her throat. The others' ears were back, eyes dilated.

"They come," Tully went on quietly. "Find my friend dead. They # angry, hit me, bring me out toward this second ship. Outside. Docks. I run. Run—long time. I come to your ship." He ducked his head, looked up again with a wan, mahendo'sat smile. "I make the keyboard right for you."

"That kif wants killing," Haral said.

"Tully," Pyanfar said. "I understand why you're careful about questions about where you come from. But I'll lay odds your space is near the kif—you just listen to me. I think your ship got among kif, and now they know there's a spacefaring species near their territories, either one they can take from—or one they're desperately afraid is a danger to them. I don't know which you are. But that's what the kif wanted with you, I'm betting—to know more about you. And you know that. And you're reluctant to talk to us either."

Tully sat unmoving for a mo-

ment. "My species is human." She caught the word from his own speech.

"Human."

"Yes, they try ask me. I don't say; make don't understand."

"Your ship—had no weapons. You don't carry them?"

No answer.

"You didn't know there was danger?"

"Don't know this space, no. Jump long. Two jump. # we hear transmission."

"Kif?"

He shook his head, his manner of *no*. "I hear—" He pointed to the com, which remained silent. "That. Make that sound."

"Knnn, for the gods' sake."

He touched his ear. "Say again. Don't understand."

"Knnn. A name. A species. Methane breather. You were in knnn territory. Worse and worse news, my friend. Knnn space is between stsho and kif."

"Captain," said Geran, "I'd lay bets with a chi the stsho had a finger in this too. Their station, after all . . . where the kif felt free to move him about the dock in public . . . I daresay the kif didn't get any questions at all from the stsho."

Pyanfar nodded thoughtfully, recalling the stsho official, the *change* in that office or that officer. A smiling welcome, impassive moonstone eyes and delicate lavender brows. A certain cold went up her back.

Knnn, kif, stsho . . . gods, the whole pot had been stirred when this Outsider, this *human*, dropped into the middle of it. The whole dock at Meetpoint, zealously trying not to hear or see anything amiss, with a fugitive on the loose and the kif on the hunt. . . .

There was no particular evil in the stsho—except the desire to avoid trouble. That had always been the way of them. But they were different. No hani read past the patterns. No hani understood them. And, gods, if the knnn were stirred up—along with the kif . . . Pyanfar started to push herself back from table, surrendering to anxiety.

"*Chanur captain,*" com said far more faintly, a clicking voice speaking the hani tongue. "*Chanur captain—don't trouble to acknowledge. Only listen. . . .*"

Pyanfar stiffened, looked toward com with a bristling at her nape and a lowering of her ears. Everyone was frozen in place.

"*The bargain you refused at Meetpoint . . . is no longer available. Now I offer other terms, equal to the situation. A new bargain. I guarantee things which properly interest you, in return for one which doesn't. Jettison the remnant of your cargo, hani thief. You know our ways. If you do the wise thing, we will not pursue you further. You know that we are the rightful owners of that merchandise. And you know now by experience that I make no empty threat. That will not improve your trade, or make you wel-*

*come at stations who will learn the hazard of your company. Give it up, thief. It's small gain against your loss, this thing you've stolen."*

"Akukkakk," Pyanfar said in a low voice when it had done. "So." The message began to repeat. Pyanfar thrust herself to her feet. "Gods rot that thing. Down it."

Chur was nearest. She sprang from her seat and turned down the volume of the wall unit. Others had started working themselves out of their places, Tully among them. Sweat had broken out on his skin, a fine, visible dew.

"Seal the galley," Pyanfar said. "Secure for jump. We're moving."

"Sleep," Tully pleaded, reminding her, panic large in his eyes.

"For the gods' sake put him out," Pyanfar snarled. She turned with fine economy and stalked out toward controls. Tirun limped after her, but Pyanfar had no disposition to wait. Anxiety prickled up and down her gut, disturbing the meal she had just eaten, sudden distrust of all the choices she had made up till now, including the one that had a slightly crazed Outsider loose on the ship in a crisis; and knnn near them; and their eyes blinded and their ears deaf to the outside. . . . It was one thing, to ride through kif fire at Meetpoint . . . quite another to face it after thinking about it.

"*Please,*" a mahendo'sat voice came through, relayed suddenly from Hilfy's board to hers. "*Stand off from station. We appeal to all sides for calm. We suggest arbitration. . . .*"

They had thrown that out on long-range, plea to all the system, to all their unruly guests, this station full of innocents, where all who could in the system had taken refuge.

"Captain." That was Chur on allship. "Life support's on and the lock's sealed again."

"Understood, Chur," she muttered, plying the keyboard and calling up her course plottings. She spun half about, indecisive. Hilfy, the weak link, sat at com, scan backup. "What's the kif doing? Any pickup?"

"Negative," Hilfy said calmly enough. "Repeat of message. I'm getting a garble out of ships insystem, no sign yet of any disruption. The knnn . . ."

That sound moaned through main com again, a transmission increasingly clear and distinct. Closer to them in this maelstrom of dust and debris. Pyanfar sucked in a breath. "Stand by to transmit, full sensors, all systems; I want a *look* out there, cousins." She hit propulsion and reoriented, reached for the main comp.

"Gods," Tirun muttered, throwing to her number-one screen the scan image which was coming in, a dust soup pocked with rocks.

"*Ship*," Haral said suddenly. Panic hit Pyanfar's gut. It was close to them, and moving.

"Resolution," she demanded. *The Pride* was accelerating, without her shields as yet. The whisper of dust over the hull became a shriek, a scream: they hit a rock and it shrilled along the hull; hit another and a screen erupted with static. "Gods, this muck!"

"No resolution," Tirun said. "Too much debris out there. We're still blind."

"Gods rot it." She hit the airlock control, blew it.

"Beeper output," Hilfy said at once. "Loud and clear. Aunt, is that our decoy?"

Pyanfar ignored the questions, harried. "Long-range com to my board. Now."

It came through unquestioned, a light on her panel. She put the mike in. "This is Pyanfar Chanur, *Hinukku*. We've just put a pod out the lock. Call it enough, *hakkikt*. Leave off."

And breaking that contact, to Hilfy: "Get that on repeat, imp, twice over; and then cut all signal output and id transmission and output the signal on translator channel five."

"Prime course laid," Haral pronounced imperturbably. "Referent bracketed."

"Stand by." Their acceleration continued: the dust screamed over the hull. Another screen broke up and recovered.

"Aunt," Hilfy exclaimed, "we're outputting *knnn* signal."

"Right we are," Pyanfar said through her teeth. She angled *The Pride* for system zenith, where no outgoing ship belonged. A prickle of sweat chilled her nose, sickly cold, and the wail over the hull continued.

"Readout behind us," Geran said, "confirmed knnn, that ship back there." Gods rot it, nothing was ever easy.

"Knnn ship," Hilfy said, "moving on the beeper. —Aunt, they're going to intercept it."

Pyanfar hesitated half a beat in turning, a glance at scan which flashed intercept probable on that ship trailing them. Knnn—by the gods, knnn were moving on the decoy, and they were not known for rescues. Something clenched on her heart, instinctive loathing, and in the next beat she flung her attention back toward the system schematic.

Knnn had the decoy; kif were not going to like that. The scream on the hull rose in pitch—"Screens," she snapped at Haral. She reached for drive control, uncapped switches. "Stand by. Going to throw our navigation all to blazes; I'll keep Alijuun off our nose when we cycle back." She pulsed the jump drive: once, twice, three times, microsecond flarings of the vanes. Her stomach lurched, pulse quickened until the blood congested in her nose and behind her eyes, narrowing vision to a pinpoint.

Instruments flickered and screens static-mad sorted themselves, manifoldly offended. An alien scream erupted from their own com. *Tully,* Pyanfar reckoned suddenly: his drugs were not quick enough. They had betrayed him like the kif.

Image appeared on her number one screen: *Alijuun.* The star was sighted and bracketed and the ID was positive.

"*Hai!*" she yelled, purest relief, and hit the jump pulse for the long one. Her voice wound in and out in a dozen colors, coiled and recoiled through the lattices which opened for them, and the stomach-wrenching sensation of jump swallowed them down. . . .

## V

*The Pride*'s nose went gently into dock, the grapples clanged to and accesses thumped open, and Pyanfar thrust back from the panel with a sudden watery feeling about the joints. Station chattered at them, requests for routine cooperations. "Shut down," she said curtly, waved a weary signal at Haral and pushed the cushion round the slight bit it could go. "Hilfy: tell station offices. Tell them we've got some shakeup. I'll talk with them when we get internal business settled." She leaned over the com. "Lowerdeck, who's at station?"

"Geran," the voice came back. "All stable below."

"Clean up. Above all get Tully straightened up and presentable."

"Understood."

Pyanfar broke the connection. There was another call coming over com.

"*Chanur, this is* Tahar's Moon Rising. *Private conference.*"

"Tahar, this is Pyanfar Chanur: we have a medical situation in progress. Stand by that conference."

"*Do you require assistance,* Pride of Chanur?"

There was, infinitesimal in the tone, satisfaction in that possibility. Pyanfar sweetened her voice with prodigious effort. "Hardly, *Moon Rising.* I'll return the call at the earliest possible. Chanur's respects, Tahar. Out."

She broke off with abruptness, pushed back and strode off. All her joints seemed rearranged, her head sitting precariously throbbing on a body which complained of abuses. Her nape bristled: not at kif presence, but at an enemy who sat much closer to home.

Gods. Beg of the Tahar? Of a house which had presented formidible threat to Chanur during her brother Kohan's holding? The satisfaction in the Tahar whelp's voice hardly surprised her. It was a spectacle, *The Pride* with her gut missing and her tail singed. There would be hissing laughter in Tahar.

And from Tahar it would go

out over Anuurn, so that it would be sure to come to Kohan. There would be challenges over this, beyond doubt there would be challenges. Some Tahar whelp would get his neck broken before the dust settled, indeed he would: young males were always optimists, always ready to set off at the smell of advantage, the least edge it might afford them.

They would try. So. They had done that before.

She stripped and showered, shed a mass of fur into the drain; dried and combed and arranged her mane and beard. It was the red silk breeches this time, the gold armlet, the pendant pearl. She surveyed herself with some satisfaction, a lift in her spirits. Appearances meant something, after all. The mahendo'sat were sensitive to the matter, quite as much as the stsho.

Offended prosperity, that was the tack to take with them. They knew *The Pride*. As long as it seemed that Chanur's fortunes were intact and that Chanur was still a power to reckon with among hani, that long they might hold some hope of mahendo'sat eagerness to serve.

She arrived in op in deliberate haste, found Geran, Chur, Tully, all clean and haggard and drowning their miseries in a round of gfi. They looked up, Tully most anxious of all.

Pyanfar put a hand on his shoulder. "Tully. The translator won't work outside the ship, understand. Once out the rampway, we can't understand each other. So I tell you here: you stay with me; you don't leave me; you do all that I say. Go to the offices."

"Offices, right."

She laid one sharp-clawed fingertip against his chest. "I'll try to get it through to you, my friend. If we go about with you aboard in secret, if we leave mahendo'sat territory with you and go on to Anuurn—to our own world—that could be trouble. Mahendo'sat might think we kept something they should have known about. So we make you public, let them all have a look at you, mahendo'sat, stsho, yes, even the kif. You wear clothes, you talk some hani words, you get yourself registered, proper papers, all the things a good civilized being needs to be a legal entity in the Compact. I'll get it all arranged for you. There's no way after you have those papers that anyone can claim you're not a sapient. I'll register you as part of my crew. Does enough of that get through? It's the last thing I can tell you."

"Don't understand all. You ask. I do it."

She wrinkled her nose , threw an impatient wave of her hand at Chur. "Come on."

A watcher stood by the ramp-

way outside, a *mahe* dockworker who scampered off quickly enough when they showed outside, and who probably made a call to his superiors . . . the mahendo'sat were discreetly perturbed, polite in their surveillance. But they were there. Pyanfar saw it, and Chur did; and Tully turned a frightened look toward the sudden movement. He talked at them, but the translator was helpless now, outside the range of the inship pickup, and Pyanfar laid a reassuring hand on his shoulder and kept him moving. "Just a precaution," she said, a quiet tone, and looked beyond to *Moon Rising*, where a far more hazardous watcher stood, a hani crewwoman.

Pyanfar diverted her course diagonally among the cannister-carriers toward *Moon Rising*. She threw a little swagger into the departure, for the Tahar and for the gaping *mahe* dockworkers, some of whom fled in haste to report to superiors or to gather comrades, a dark-furred and scantly clad crowd.

"They noticed," Chur said.

"That they have." Pyanfar locked her hands behind her and they strolled along in company, one tall hani captain in scarlet, one smallish hani crewwoman in roughspun blue, and improbably between them a towering wide-shouldered Outsider with naked skin and a beautiful golden mane, excruciatingly conspicuous.

They reached the lift, pushed the button, *mahe* giving way about them and crowding back again at every opportunity, a roar of crowd-noise about them. "Captain," someone asked, one of the mahendo'sat. "What is this being?"

She turned about with a grin which lacked all patience, and mahendo'sat who knew hani backed up, but there was humor in it too, satisfaction at the turmoil. The lift arrived, and a half dozen startled *mahe* decided to vacate it, whether or not they had planned on getting out. They edged out the door in haste and Pyanfar seized Tully by the arm and put him inside.

The door closed and the lift shot upward. Pyanfar let go of Tully's arm and put her hand on his back, ready to indicate to him to move out. He was sweating despite the chill in the air. On the other side of him Chur patted his arm. The lift stopped once. Those waiting decided against entering, eyes wide; and the lift went on up.

"Friend," Tully said nervously, out of his scant hani repertoire.

"Mahendo'sat and stsho," Pyanfar said. "Friend. Yes."

The car stopped a second time, a quieter corridor in the office complex. Tully walked with them, out and down the hall, startling other *mahe* workers. Pyanfar whisked him through

the welcome office doors ahead. She patted his shoulder and looked round the gaudy room at a frozen officeful of mahendo'sat, most standing.

"I'm Pyanfar Chanur. You requested an interview."

There was a general flutter, the foremost of the officials dithering about letting them through the general registry area to the more secluded complex behind the doors.

At last he led them through into a luxurious waiting area, thick carpet and pillowlike couches in bright colors, hastened about providing them refreshment as they settled on a facing group of couches. "Sit, sit," Pyanfar said, providing Tully the example, legs tucked and ankles crossed.

The official set the welcoming tray on a portable table in their midst. His dark *mahe* eyes were alive with curiosity. "Beg understanding, hani captain . . . this is—passenger?"

"Crew," Pyanfar said with a prim pursing of the lips. She accepted the glass the *mahe* filled, two-handed, *mahe* style in her holding of it; and saw to her satisfaction that the *mahe* had in fact provided three glasses. He filled the second and gave it to Chur, whose manners were impeccable, and with some diffidence offered the last to Tully.

Tully took his after the same fashion, keen mimic. The door opened. A handful of mahendo'sat, important with elaborate bright kilts and collars, came in on them. An elderly *mahe* whose dark fur was graying and whose flat face had all the other attributes of age looked toward Pyanfar with a lowering of the ears.

"Chanur captain?"

"The same. Have I the honor to know you?"

"Ahe Stasteburana-to, I."

The stationmaster in person. She made another bow, and the stationmaster did the same. Then with apparent distraction Stasteburana strolled off, while another of the company made a stiffer bow and launched into them. "You pay, Chanur captain, fines for reckless approach. Fines for bring debris boosted through, danger to all innocent. Fines for reckless haste near station. For bring hazardous situation."

"I spit at your charges. Fines—you're brigands, bloodsuckers, to prey off a friendly ship with a longstanding account at this station, when for the preservation of our lives and the protection of the Compact we had to come in for shelter against piracy. A hani, a *hani*, mind, asks shelter, and when have we ever done such a thing? Are you blind and deaf as well as greedy?"

The Personage Stasteburana held up his aged and manicured hand. His Voice silenced herself and broke off with a bow, while

Stasteburana strolled back. He was attended by a small brown and white fluff, which growled at the scent of hani. "You make large commotion, honorable Chanur, great hani captain; yes, we know you—long time absent; maybe trade our rival Ajir, but we know you. Maybe make deal on fines. But serious matter. Where come from?"

"Meetpoint and Urtur via Kita, wise *mahe*."

"With *this*?" An ears-flat look at Tully. . .

"An unfortunate. A being of great sensitivity, wise and gentle *mahe*. His ship was wrecked, his companions gone . . . he cast himself on my charity and proves of considerable value."

"Value, hani captain?"

"He needs papers, wise *mahe*, and my ship needs repairs."

Again Stasteburana walked away, aloof from the Voice. "Your ship got no cargo," the Voice spat. "You come empty hand, make big trouble here. You ask credit, hani captain; what credit? We make you fines, you send Anuurn get cargo, maybe two, three hani ship pay off damages. You got us knnn. You got us kif. We know this. You go talk hani at next berth, ask she pay your fines."

"Trivial. I have cargo, better than *Moon Rising*. I make you a deal, in spite of your uncivilized behavior. I make a deal all mahendo'sat will want."

The Voice looked at Tully, and the Personage turned about and frowned. Stasteburana made a further sign to his other three companions, and one of them called to someone in the hall.

It was not easy to make distinctions between mahendo'sat of the same age and sex and build, but about the large and relatively plain fellow who answered that summons there was an instant and queasy familiarity—particularly when he flashed a broad gilt-edged smile. Pyanfar sucked in her breath and tucked her hands behind her, pulling the claws back in.

"Captain Ana Ismehanan-min of the freighter *Mahijiru*," Stasteburana said softly. "Acquaintance to you, yes."

"Indeed," Pyanfar said, and bowed, which gesture Goldtooth returned with a flourish.

"This kif business," said Stasteburana, folding his wrinkled hands at his middle. "Explain, hani captain."

"Who am I to know what a kif thinks? They let this unfortunate being slip their fingers and expected me to sell him back, plainly illegal. Then they attacked a hani ship which was completely ignorant of the matter. A Handur ship was completely destroyed, unless the captain of *Mahijiru* has better news."

"No good news," Goldtooth agreed sadly. "All lost, hani captain. All."

The Personage turned and

tapped Goldtooth on the shoulder, spoke to him in one of those obscure *mahen* languages outside her reckoning. Goldtooth bowed profoundly and backed aside, and Pyanfar looked warily at the Personage. "You know," she said, to recover the initiative, "*what* the kif wanted; and you know that there's no chance of hiding such a prize, not here, not on Anuurn either. No good hiding it at all."

"I make you—" There was a beep from someone's pager. A voice followed, and one of the attendants came forward in consternation, offered the instrument to the hand of the Personage Stasteburana. There was talk of knnn: that much survived the local dialect; the Personage's eyes grew wider. "*Where* is it?" Pyanfar caught that much, and saw distress among the others.

"Screen," Stasteburana ordered in his own tongue.

The main screen livened in front of them, meters wide and showing a dimly lit dockside. Blues and violets, a horrid light, like nightmare, and a scuttling shape like a snarl of hair possessed of an indefinite number of thin black legs. It darted this way and that, dragging with it, clutched in jaws—appendages under the hair?—something which glittered with metal and had the look of a long-limbed hani body.

With a sinking feeling Pyanfar recognized it. It was a good bet that so did Chur and Tully, who had conspired in its construction.

"That's a knnn," Pyanfar said to Tully. He said something back, short and unhappy. On the screen the creature scurried this way and that with its burden, eluding the attempts of writhing shapes in the shadows which tried to deal with it: those were tc'a. Something stiltlike joined the commotion, darted at the flitting knnn and tugged at the prize, skittered off again. *Chi*, by the gods: those manic beggars. The limb glowed phosphorescent yellow, left confusing trails on the screen in its haste.

Suddenly a knnn darted forward, seized one of the leathery, serpent-shaped tc'a and dragged it off into their retreating line. There was a frantic hissing and clicking from the mass of tc'a, but apart from a milling about, a writhing and twining of dozens of serpentine bodies like so many fingers lacing and unlacing in distress . . . nothing. Not the least attempt at counterattack or rescue. Pyanfar watched the kidnapping with her ears laid back.

So the knnn had traded, after its fashion: darted onto station and laid down its offered goods—made off with something it took for fair; and now another species had descended

to trading in sapients.

"What is it?" a *mahe* asked distressedly, and fell silent. A communication came through, and a technician approached the Personage Stasteburana.

"Hani-make EVA-pod," that one said, and Stasteburana turned a disturbed glance on Pyanfar, who lifted her ears and assumed her most careless expression.

"I shouldn't want to disturb you," Pyanfar said. "All you'll find in that suit, wise *mahe*, is a very spoiled lot of meat from our locker; I'd advise you take decontamination precautions before taking that pod helmet off. The knnn seems to have intercepted a gift of mine meant for the kif. It's confused, I'm sure. Probably it'll return the tc'a. —It was, at the time, a matter of necessity, revered *mahe*."

"Necessity!"

"Only spoiled food, I assure you. Nothing more. —We were on the point of discussing repairs to my ship . . . which are urgent. You'll not want me sitting at your dock any longer than you have to. Ask the honest captain of *Mahijiru*."

"Outrage!" the Voice proclaimed. "Extortion!"

"Shall we discuss the matter?" asked Pyanfar.

"Trouble first with kif and now with knnn and with tc'a. Deceptions and hazards to this station."

"A new species, revered *mahe*. That's the prize that has the kif disturbed. They see the hope of profit the like of which they've not known before; and I have the sole surviving member of his company, a spacefaring people, communicative, *civilized*, wise *mahe*, and fit to tilt the balance of the Compact. This was the prize at Meetpoint. This was the reason of the loss of the Handur ship, and this was the part of my cargo I refused to jettison. Surely we agree, revered *mahe*, what the kif meant to do if they had gotten this information first. Shall I tell you more of my suspicions . . . that the stsho knew something about what was going on? That kif meant to annex a large portion of adjacent space . . . having intimidated the stsho? That having done so, they would then be in a position to expand their operations and rearrange the map of the Compact to suit themselves—an acquisition from which the other members of the Compact would be positionally excluded; only the stsho . . . who would lick the kif's feet. And what future for the Compact then? What of this Compact which holds all of our very profitable trade together? What of the balance of things? But I shall tell you what I have: a tape, a tape, my good, my great and farsighted *mahe* elder, for a symbol translator . . . a tape which the kif spent sapient lives to obtain and failed to get. We aren't selfish; I make

this tape available to mahendo'sat as freely as hani, in the interests of spreading this knowledge as far as possible among like-minded people. But I want my ship repaired, the fines forgotten, the assurance that Chanur will continue in the friendship of this great and powerful station."

The elder flared his nostrils and puffed breaths back and forth. He consulted with his Voice, who spoke to him rapidly involving kif and knnn. The Personage turned back yet again. "This tape deal—"

"—key to another species, revered *mahe*. Mahendo'sat will have access to this development; meet ships of this kind—assured peaceful meeting, full communication. And mind, you deal with no stranger, no one who will cheat you and be gone. Chanur expects to be back at Kirdu in the future, expects—may I speak to you in confidence—to *develop* this new find."

Stasteburana cast a nervous glance at Tully. "And what you find, a? Find trouble. Make trouble."

"Are you willing to have the kif do the moving and the growing and the getting? They assuredly will, good *mahe*, if we don't."

The Personage made nervous moves of his hands. "Make papers this sapient being," he said to his Voice. "Make repairs. All hani go. Go away." He looked at Pyanfar. "But you give tape. We say nothing to kif."

"Wise *mahe*," Pyanfar said with all her grace, and bowed.

The Personage waggled fingers and dismissed them in the company of the Voice, and the fluff growled at their backs.

The papers came back, plasticized and permanent, with Tully's face staring back from them; species handwritten, classification general spacer semiskilled, sex male, and most of the other circles unfilled.

Elsewhere, she trusted, orders were being passed which would get a repair skimmer prioritied for *The Pride*. The mahendo'sat's prime concern had become getting rid of them at utmost speed: she did not doubt it. There would be a *mahe* official demanding that tape before all was done: that was beyond doubt too.

Pyanfar, Chur, and Tully walked the corridor to the right from the identifications office doorway, toward the lift, past occasional mahendo'sat office-workers and business folk who either found reason to duck back into their doorways or anxiously tried to ignore them.

Pyanfar pressed the lift button. "Come," she said as the lift arrived empty. The door closed and the lift started down. The car let them out on the docks.

The crowd had dispersed

somewhat, thank the gods; but not enough. Pyanfar watched on all sides, reckoning that by now trouble had time to organize itself. And it was there. Kif—by the gantries, watching. That presence did not at all surprise her.

The rampway access gaped ahead. A group of mahendo'sat law enforcement stood there, sticks in hand, and the crowd went no further.

But among the gantries beside them . . . hani shadows. *Moon Rising*'s folk had spilled over from the next berth, behind the security line. "Come on," she said to Chur and Tully.

She headed into the rampway's ribbed and lighted gullet. "*In*," she said to her companions, and turned to bar the intruder who appeared around the curve. Her ears were flat; she reached instinctively for the weapon she had left behind—but the figure was hani, silk-breeched and jewelled, striding boldly right up the rampway.

"Tahar," she spat, waved a dismissing hand. "Gods, do we need complications?"

Dur Tahar ignored her, looked beyond her shoulder—at what sight, Pyanfar had no trouble guessing. "What species is it? Where from? The rumor flying the dock says kif space. Or knnn. Says there's a knnn ship here that dropped a hani body."

"I'll tell it to you once, Tahar: we got this item at Meetpoint and the kif took out *Handur's Voyager* for spite, no survivors. Caught them sitting at dock, and they and we hadn't even been in communication. We dumped cargo and ran for Urtur, and the kif followed us. They want this fellow badly. And it's gotten beyond simple profit and loss with them. There's a *hakkikt* involved, and there's no stopping this thing till we've got him. Maybe we did, at Urtur. He looked bad, and that may settle it. But if you want to make yourself useful, you're welcome to run our course." same data I gave the mahendo'sat. But if you leave this in our laps, then by the gods we'll settle it our way without your help."

"Suppose you make yourself generous. Give this thing into my hands. I'll see it gets safe to Anuurn."

"No, thanks."

"I'll bet not. You can deal with the mahendo'sat, after all, but not with a rival. Well, Chanur's not going to sit on this one, I'll promise you that, Pyanfar Chanur. And if this turns out to be the fiasco it promises to be, I'll be on your heels. That Kohan brother of yours is getting soft. Back home, they know it. This should do it, shouldn't it?"

"Out!"

"Give me the information you traded the mahendo'sat. And we may view things in a better light."

"If you were *mahe* I'd trust you more. Look him over, Dur Tahar. But anything else you want to know . . . I'll decide on when I've got this straightened out. Never fear; you'll get the same data I gave the mahendo'sat. But if you leave this in our laps, then by the gods we'll settle it our way without your help."

Dur Tahar laid her ears back and started to go, lingered for one poisonous look beyond, toward the airlock, and a focus snapped back on center. "I'll ask you at Anuurn, then. And you'll have answers, gods rot you. You'll come up with them."

"Out."

Dur Tahar had made her offer. Perhaps she had expected a different answer. She flinched, managed a lazy indifference, smoothed her rippled beard, turned and looked back toward the airlock a last time, slowly, before she stalked out.

"Gods," Pyanfar muttered through her teeth. *That* was muffed. She should have been quicker on her mental feet, slower of temper. The Tahar might have been talked into it. Maybe wanted to be talked into it. If a Tahar could be trusted at their backs. She hated the whole of it, *mahe*, Tahar, Outsider, all of it. Not a word from Chur the whole way back, regarding the business she had conducted, this tape-selling, trust-selling.

So. Done, for good or ill. Pyanfar leaned against the wall, aching in all her bones, her vision fuzzing. After a moment she walked out, down the vacant corridor toward the lifts, hoping to all the gods Geran could find no incident to put between her and bed.

## VI

*Moon Rising* pulled out in the offshift, a departure without word to them, in Pyanfar's night. She ignored it, snarling an incoherency from out the bedclothes to the com at bedside when she was advised, and pulling the cover back over herself; it was not worth getting up to see, and she had no courtesies to pay the Tahar, who deserted another hani to strangers, crippled as they still sat. Pyanfar burrowed into sleep again and shed the matter from her mind . . . no getting her adrenalin up to rob herself of rest, no thinking about here, or home, or anything in particular; only maybe the repairs which were still proceeding, which ought to be virtually finished by the time she woke; all the panels in place now, and *mahe* working out on their tail checking all the sorry little connections on which their lives relied.

Six hours; nine; twelve; thirteen. The day passed in meals-at-station, in checks and counterchecks, in enforced rest and

secure-for-jump procedures, and most of all in monitoring scan and com. Pyanfar reached the stage of pacing and fretting by the twelfth hour, fed and napped beyond endurance.

"Courier's here." Chur's voice cracked out of the silence on the bridge, com from lowerdeck. "Asking for the tape, Captain."

"Ask the courier the finish time on the repair."

A delay.

"The courier says within the hour, Captain."

"Understood." Pyanfar caught her breath, looked left where she had laid the tape she had prepared, reached and pocketed the cassette and headed out for the lift, in such a fever that it was not till she had started the lift downward that she thought again what it was she went down to trade: away from this place was all the thought; and the tape was a means to get free.

The lift stopped, the door opened, and she hesitated half a heartbeat in walking out. She found a gathering indeed—a dignified-looking *mahe* in a jewelled collar and kilt; a *mahe* attendant; Haral, Tirun, and Hilfy. She walked into the group suddenly conscious of her own informal attire, scowled and drew herself up to all her stature —none too tall in mahendo'sat reckoning.

"Bad mess," the ranking *mahe* spat at her. "Big trouble you cause. All same we fix ship."

The Voice of the stationmaster, primed with accusations and bluster. The Voice looked her up and down with grand hauteur. Pyanfar flexed her claws, pointedly and with grander coolness turned her shoulder and looked toward her own. "Tully. Where's Tully? Is he still in op?"

"You endanger the station," the Voice railed on dutifully. "Take kif property; big trouble with tc'a; knnn bastard kidnap and extortion. You want the EVA-pod the knnn bring for trade for good tc'a citizen, hah? Got your name on it, hani. *Pride of Chanur*, clear letters."

"*Tully!* Get your rotted self out here. Now!"

Tully came out of the op room, Chur attending him. He had on his new stsho-made shirt, white silk and blue borders—looked immaculately civilized and no little upset in the shouting. "The papers, Tully," Pyanfar said. "Show them to this kind *mahe*."

He fished his pocket for the folder, pale eyes anxious.

"I got no need cursed papers," the Voice snapped.

"You issued them," Pyanfar said. "*Property* of the kif, you say. You look at this fine, this honest, this documented member of an intelligent and civilized spacefaring species and you talk about him with words like *property of the kif?* I call down shame on you; I ask you explain to him, you, in your own words, explain this *property*."

"The tapes," the Voice said. "The tapes you make deal cover *some* damage."

"All the damages. No fines. No charges. No complaints."

The Voice considered a moment, nodded. "The tape," she said, holding out her hand. "This give, repair finish. Give you safe escort. Fair deal, Chanur."

Pyanfar took it from her pocket, an uncommon warmth about her ears—looked aside at Tully. She thrust it at him. "*You* give it. Yours."

Hilfy opened her mouth to say something and shut it. Tully looked down at the cassette, looked up at the Voice and hesitantly handed the tape toward her. "Friend," he said in the hani tongue. "Friend to *mahe*."

The dark-furred hand closed on the cassette. The Voice laid back her ears and pursed her mouth in thoughtful consideration. Tully still had his hand out—his own kind of gesture—kept it out. Slowly the *mahe* reached out, alien protocol being her calling, and gamely suffered Tully to clasp her hand, took it back without visible flinching . . . but with a subdued quiet unlike herself. She bowed her head that slightest degree of courtesy. "I carry your word," she said.

With a glance at Pyanfar: "You undock one hour. Skimmers go now. You make good quick voyage, Chanur captain." The Voice bowed once.

"An hour, hear?" Pyanfar said to the others. "An hour and we're underway, out of here. *Home*."

"Seal us up, captain?" Haral shouted down the corridor.

"Seal us up," Pyanfar confirmed, and stopped in mid-wave as a tall dark figure appeared in the corridor behind Haral. "*Ware!*"

Mahendo'sat. Haral had already spun about, and the lanky, dark-furred *mahe* walked on in as if he belonged, flashing a gilt-edged grin.

"Ismehanan—" Pyanfar shouted. "—*Goldtooth*, gods rot you, slinking into my corridors without by your leave—who let you in?"

The grin in no wise diminished. The *mahe* gave a sweeping bow and straightened as she strode up to him. "Got sudden business, Chanur, maybe same you course."

"*Whose* business?"

"Maybe same you business."

She swelled up with a breath and looked up at him, hands in the back of her waistband. "Maybe you talk straight, Captain. Once."

He grinned and turned on his heel, walked off toward the lock, then paused to wave. "*Mahijiru* you escort, Captain. You got number one best."

He was gone while the echoes were still ringing. It was the stationmaster's terms and there was nothing they could do to

stop him from following. "Seal that lock," she said to Haral. "Gods know what else might get in." Haral went on the run. Pyanfar looked about at the others, at Tully, and Chur and Hilfy and Tirun; and Geran, who had stepped out of op.

"We're going home," Pyanfar said shortly. "Home, by the gods. They've cost us time. If Stasteburana's got notions of using us, rot him; two can play that game. I'll give them our course; I'll give them a lead-in inside the Anuurn perimeter.

"We've got trouble, cousins. Chanur trouble. Word's been passing, from the Tahar; now's the time to tell you. My son Kara has overthrown Khym Mahn. The old Mahn is in exile, and Kohan Chanur is in sudden need of all his allies."

Pyanfar paused, to let the information sink in. Khym overthrown. Dead, maybe. At the least in exile. The loss of her mate oppressed her to a surprising degree. But no time, no time. She shook her head, heard the comforting jingle.

Down the corridor, the lock boomed shut. *The Pride* had begun her separation.

"Getting pickup on the companion," Chur said, snugged in com station. "They swear it's a secure line."

"Huh." Pyanfar finished up the checks and reached for the contact flashing on her com module. "Chanur here."

"Introduce you," Goldtooth's voice came back to her. "Captain Pyanfar Chanur, got link to *Aja Jin*. Captain Nomesteturjai. Also escort."

"Chanur," a voice rumbled back. "Name *Jik*, here."

"Number one fellow, Jik," Goldtooth said. "Honest same you, Pyanfar Chanur."

"Honest like stall me off; like delay me. Chanur's fighting for its life, you rag-eared bastard, does that get through your head? The Tahar house is sure to challenge my brother Kohan and the Chanur holdings. *Challenge*; and I'm not there. In your spying about, do you know what that means?"

"Ah," Goldtooth said. "Know this trouble. Yes."

Pyanfar said nothing, forced the claws back in.

"Know where this Akkukkak too," Goldtooth said. "Interested, hani captain?"

"After I've settled my own business."

"Same place."

"*Anuurn?*"

"Keep you alive, hani. We make slow maybe, but you make deal we want. More big than pearls and welders, ah, hani?"

"You follow, rot you." She keyed through the course on comp. "There's the way."

It was a smooth parting, an easy push clear and a nosing toward an untrafficked nadir as gee started up, a whine of the

rotational engines. Comp flashed them their lane, and scan showed *Mahijiru* and *Aja Jin* moving down below the station rim off portside. *The Pride* gathered momentum, a solid gee and a half now, outbound.

"Kif are moving out," Geran said. "Number-two screen."

"Understood." She darted a look at station-sent scan. The kif were not gaining, were maintaining a sedate acceleration in their wake.

Goldtooth and this stranger Jik: escort. She did not, she admitted to herself, understand the *mahen* order of things, no more than Outsiders understood the stsho.

"*Knnn*," Geran said suddenly; and vid went off and another image came in, sectorized on a mass of knnn ships.

"Never mind the rotted knnn," Pyanfar said. "Watch the kif; op, take that sectorized image and keep us posted."

It vanished from her screen; Tirun acknowledged receipt below. Behind them, on the image which turned up, the kif started now to move.

She was watching it. Flexed her claws carefully on the togglegrip. "Moving out," she told the *mahe*. "Going to boost up and test; clear my field, understand? No more time here."

She moved the control. The Pride kicked up to widen the interval between herself and the *mahe*. On scan the kif fell further and further behind, chancing nothing with the patrol.

And the knnn—the knnn streamed along in a manic flood, accelerating as they went, a few points off their course.

"Clear," Haral said. "All stable. Coming up on jump."

"Stand by the long one," Pyanfar advised the crew below. Cast a last and frantic look at scan, where *Mahijiru* and *Aja Jin* had fallen behind on estimated-position.

*Luck*, she wished the *mahe*. In spite of other things. In spite of deceits; in spite of *mahen* purposes which had nothing to do with hers. *Luck*, she thought; and: *conniving liar*.

The course was flashing on the screen, a jump first for Ajir System, and through it to Anuurn itself, the straightest course and the most vulnerable to ambush; but they were out of time for finesse.

They reached their point. *Mahijiru* would be after them, gliding on their tail; and *Aja Jin*, that other of Goldtooth's ilk. . . .

Weeks, in the time-notime of jump . . .

They were in. Anuurn beacon welcomed them out of it; they hit course on Kilan Station's guidance. "Dump behind us," Chur said. "Second arrival; both our friends are in."

There was the huge shipyard of Harn Station, where all hani

ships were born and where they came for refitting and repair. But there were twice the usual number, easily twice, of ships in offlanes positions, waiting; ships in clusters.

"Not all ours," Pyanfar said. And after a moment: "He's *here.* Goldtooth said it; the kif at Kirdu said it. *Hinukku*'s come here. After revenge."

The minutes crawled past. Jik's *Aja Jin* came into position, so that *The Pride* went flanked by the *mahe*. "Goldtooth," Pyanfar said. "You come onstation with me; want your friend stay out of dock and watch, a?"

"A," the answer came back, short and sweet; from Jik no word. He would do it, Pyanfar thought.

Knnn-song wailed out of com.

"Gods and thunders!" Pyanfar spat. "Location on that."

"Ahead of us," Geran said. "One of those ships moving up on station."

Knnn never called at Anuurn. Never, till now.

"Cut that thing off," Pyanfar said. "Hilfy. Tully's channel." Hilfy turned her pager onto broadcast. "Tully—we're home now. Anuurn. Got trouble here."

"Kif," Tully said. "I hear. Hani—make deal with them?"

"Papers," Pyanfar said sharply, and when Tully's hand went to his left pocket: "You keep those with you. You're registered; you've got a number in the Compact. No. No way the kif can take you by law. Going to have one lot of mad kif, maybe; maybe some mad hani. But they can't take you, except by force."

"Pyanfar." Tully thrust out his hand to stop her from turning away. "*I don't go from you.*"

She cuffed his arm, claws not quite pulled. "You listen, friend Tully; you *think*, rot your hide. We go off this ship; we; you; we come back, you come back with us. Hear?"

"Come with you?"

"I say it."

He flung his arms about her; sweaty, reeking as he was, as they both were, he hugged her with abandon. She shoved him off in indignation, which in no wise changed the look in his eyes.

"Do all you say," he said.

"By the gods you'll do it. You do something wrong and I'll notch your ears for you. You keep that brain of yours working or I'll rattle it like a gourd. Can you do that? Can you look at a kif and not go crazy?"

That took a moment's thought. He nodded then. "Get them other time," he said confidently, waved a hand toward the wide infinite. "We go find kif pull their heads off."

The mangled extravagance appealed to her; he did, with his clear-eyed insanity. "If we get out of this," she promised him, "we go skin some kif. Next trip out. I take you with me."

That was premature. They owned nothing to give away, least of all the disposition of the Outsider. Lose Chanur, she thought with a chill, and they could make no more promises at all.

They gathered belowdecks, all of them, clean and combed, excepting Tirun, who had never gotten her turn at washing up. Tully wore a white stsho shirt belted hiplength about him, and a better pair of blue breeches. "Come on," Pyanfar said. "Let's find out what's waiting out there. —Tirun, Geran, you keep that lock sealed for everyone but us, no matter how bad it gets to sound, no matter what they offer you. Get on the com. Tell Goldtooth to get moving."

"Aye," Tirun said.

Pyanfar led the way onto the rampway plates, around the curve and down toward the grayness of the dockside. The translator was out of pickup range now: Tully became effectively deaf and mute. Pyanfar directed her attention sharply ahead, where dockworkers had set up cord barriers—where a station official made her body the gateway.

Llun house, that guard, if the set of the ears was any true indication, a mature hani in the black breeches of officialdom immemorial. The Llun drew a paper from her belt as they approached her and offered it, not without an ear-down look at Tully: but the Llun kept her dignity all the same. "*Ker* Chanur, you're requested for Gathering in the main meeting area. You're held responsible for all the others of your party; it's assumed the *mahen* ship is under your escort."

"Accepted," Pyanfar said, taking the paper. The Llun moved aside then to let them pass, impeccable in her neutrality. A little distance away, at the next berth, a similar barrier was set up about *Mahijiru's* access. "Come," Pyanfar said to the others. She let her jaw drop as Goldtooth led a good number of *mahe* down onto the dock, a Goldtooth resplendent in dark red collar and kilt, glittering with *mahen* decorations.

Goldtooth offered his papers to the hani on guard, but the guard waved him through unquestioned. "Where we go?"

"Gathering. *Ihi*. Place where we sort things out. Hani law here, *mahe*. Civilized."

They entered the corridor. It stretched ahead, polished, clean, uncommonly vacant.

"Too rotted few," Pyanfar said. She turned a corner, saw the doors of the meeting hall ahead, double-guarded.

"Chanur," one guard said. The doors whisked open, and a milling, noisy crowd of hani were gathered beyond. Pyanfar stopped in the midst, looked toward the station authorities who gathered there.

And kif, to their right, a cluster of black robes. A pair of stsho. Pyanfar's nose wrinkled and her ears flattened, but she lifted them again as she faced the Llun, who stood centermost and prominent among the station families. She held up the paper and proffered it for a page who retrieved it and took it to the Llun senior.

"Chanur requests transport downworld," Pyanfar said quietly. "Our claim has precedence over any litigation."

There was a long silence. The Llun senior's ears lowered and lifted. Her nose wrinkled and smoothed again. "Point of equity," she declared. "The composition of the *han* is in fact in question. Family right takes precedence. The hearing is postponed until Chanur rights have been settled."

"*No*," said a familiar voice.

"Akukkakk," Pyanfar said.

"We protest this decision," the kif said to the Llun. Not whining, no: he drew himself up with borderline arrogance. "We have property in question. We've suffered damages. This Outsider and these *mahe* are in question. I claim this Outsider for kif jurisdiction; and I claim these *mahe* as well for crimes committed in our territories. They're from the ship *Mahijiru*, which is wanted for crimes contrary to the Compact."

"Tully," Pyanfar said. "Papers."

He moved up beside her and gave them to her, rigidly quiet. She offered the papers to the page, who took and read them.

"Tully. Listed by Kirdu Station authority as crew, *The Pride of Chanur*, with a *mahen* registration number."

"The connection is obvious," the kif said. "I charge this Outsider with attack on a kif ship in our territories; with murder of kif citizens; with numerous atrocities and crimes against the Compact and against kif law in our territories."

Pyanfar tilted her head back with a small, unfriendly smile. "Fabrications. Is the Llun going to tolerate this move?"

"In which acts," Akukkakk continued, "this Chanur ship intervened at Meetpoint, with the provocation of a shooting incident on the docks, the killing of one of my crew; with the provocation of a hani attack in the vicinity of the station, in which we defended ourselves. In which attack this *mahe* intervened and took damage, a reckless act of piracy—"

"Lie," Goldtooth said. "Got here papers my government charge this kif."

"A wide-reaching conspiracy," Akukkakk said, "in which Chanur has involved itself. *Ambition*, wise hani. *I* have heard . . . the Chanur have maintained a tight hold over the further territories where your ships go, private for themselves and

their partisans. Now they deal with the *mahe,* on their own; now they make separate treaties with Outsider forces, contrary to the Compact, for their own profit. This is respect for the Compact?"

"Llun," said Pyanfar, "this kif is disregarding the station's decision. The law protects the *han* from such outside manipulations. These charges are a tactic, nothing more."

"No," said a voice from the gallery behind. A hani voice. A voice she had heard. Pyanfar turned, ears flattened, pricked them up again as she saw a whole array of familiar faces on the other side of the hall. Dur Tahar and her crew.

"This is not," the Llun said, "a hearing. The kif delegation has its rights to lodge a protest; but the matter is deferred."

Dur Tahar walked forward, planted herself widelegged. "What I have to say has bearing on the protest. The kif's right that the Chanur's gone too far, right that the Chanur's made deals on her own. Ask about a translator tape the Chanur traded to mahendo'sat and denied to us. Ask about this Outsider the Chanur claims as crew. Ask about deals worked out in Kirdu offices which excluded other hani and created incidents from there to Meetpoint."

"By the gods, *ambition!*" Pyanfar yelled, and crooked an extended claw at the Tahar's person. "*Ambition's* a spacer captain who'd side with a hani-killing kif to serve her house's grab for power. Gods!" she shouted, "is there anyone here from Aheruun? Anyone from that side of the world, someone here to speak for the Handur ship this kif killed at Meetpoint, while they were nose to dock and had no idea there was any trouble in the system? *Ambition*—is the Tahar, who left us at Kirdu crippled and alone and came running home to use the information to Tahar advantage, who sides with the kif who destroyed a hani ship without warning, a kif who's terrorized these wretched stsho into coming here with gods know what story, a kif who's created a crisis involving the whole structure of the Compact. By the gods, I know what blinds the Tahar to the facts."

The kif howled and clicked until Akukkakk himself lifted a bony gray arm and shouted, turning to the Llun. "Justice, hani, *justice.* This lying thief Chanur was involved from the beginning, private ally of the mahendo'sat, an agent of theirs from the beginning, involved with them in attacks, reckless attacks into our territory which we do not forget."

"This kif," Goldtooth roared, louder still, "*hakkikt.* Killer. Thirty ships his. Make move new kind trouble in Compact, got no care Compact, spit at Compact."

"Danger our station," the stsho stammered, thrust forward by the kif. "We protest—we protest this incident; demand compensation—"

"*Enough*," the Llun said over all the uproar, and hani noise died quickly; kif commotion sank away likewise.

"Enough," the Llun said, scowling. "The kif has his right to protest and to advance a claim. But since that claim exists, all sides have a right to be heard. There's a further statement entered in this cause."

She took a card from her belt, thrust it into the wall slot which controlled the hall viewing screen. It flared to life, rapid printout.

| **stsho** | **kif** | **knnn** | **(*)** | **hani** | **mahe** | **tc'a** |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| station | ship | ship | ship | ship | ship | self |
| trade | kill | see | here | run | watch | know |
| fear | want | see | hani | escape | help | knnn |
| violation | violation | violation | violation | violation | violation | self |
| Compact | Compact | Compact | Compact | Compact | Compact | Compact |
| help | help | help | help | help | help | help |

Tc'a communication, matrix communication of a multipartite brain, simultaneous thought-chains. Pyanfar studied it, took a deeper breath, and Goldtooth looked, and the kif, and all the hani.

"It's the tc'a with that rotted knnn," Haral murmured.

"It got itself an *interpreter*; by the gods," Pyanfar muttered, and a vast grin spread across her face. "Got itself that tc'a off Kirdu and it's talking to us, gods prosper it. —See that, kif? Your neighbors don't like your company; and someone else saw what happened, someone you can't corrupt."

"We've got a major crisis thanks to you," Dur Tahar cried, thrusting herself between Pyanfar and the Llun. "I call for the detention of this Outsider pending judicial action; suspension of this *mahe*'s permit and papers; for the censure of the captain of *The Pride of Chanur* along with all her crew and the house that sponsors her meddling."

"But nothing for the kif?" Pyanfar returned. "Nothing for a kif adventurer who murdered hani and *mahe* and provokes a powerful Outsider species, with all *that* might mean? *Ambition*, Tahar. And greed. And cowardice. What have you got from the kif? A promise Tahar ships will be safe if this dies down? I turned down a kif bribe. What did you do when they made you the offer?"

It was a chance shot, a wild shot; and the Tahar's ears went back and her eyes went wide as if she had been hit hard and un-

expectedly. Everyone saw it. There was a sudden hush in the room: the Tahar visibly at a loss, the kif drawing ever so slightly together, the stsho holding onto each other. It was bitter satisfaction, the sight of that retreat. "Bastard," Pyanfar said.

Akukkakk stood with his arms folded, kifish amusement drawing down the corners of his mouth and lengthening his gray, wrinkled face.

"He's laughing," Pyanfar said. "At hani weaknesses. At ambition that makes us forget we don't trade in all markets, in all commodities. And at his reckoning we'll trade again to get our ships moving again outside our own home system—because there are more kif out there than you see, and hani won't all fight. Hani never do. Hani never have. And I've been stalled long enough. I was promised transport downworld and I'm taking it. I'm going home and I'm coming back, master thief, master killer—and I'll see you in that full hearing."

Akukkakk no longer laughed. His arms were still folded. The kif were all very quiet. The whole room was. Pyanfar made a stiff bow to the Llun, turned and walked for the door.

It opened and sealed again at their backs. They passed Llun guards. The corridor stretched ahead, empty.

"Going to my ship," Goldtooth said. "Going to back off and keep watch these kif."

"Going to the shuttle launch," Pyanfar said. "Got business won't wait. Got stupid son and trouble in Chanur holding. Life and death, *mahe*."

"Kif find you go, make one shot you shuttle. Jik make you escort, a? Run close you side, make orbit, get you back safe."

She stared up at the *mahe*'s very sober face, reached and clasped his dark-furred and muscular arm. "You want help after this, *mahe*, you got it. Number-one help. This kif lies. You know it."

"Know this," Goldtooth said. "Know this all time."

Editor's Note:

*Pyanfar and crew went home to Chanur; what they found there was bad enough, but not irreparable. The Chanur holding, in its lush valley, was overrun by ambitious Tahar and Mahn youngsters, led by Pyanfar's own son and daughter, Kara and Tahy, and old Kahi Tahar, Chanur's southern rival. Kohan Chanur wisely had held his counsel until Pyanfar's arrival, having been duly notified when* The Pride *arrived insystem. His prudence proved to be fortunate. Pyanfar's timely appearance, along with the news of the Tahar family's ignominious dealings with the kif, were enough to tilt the balance of power back into Chanur hands, and Kohan held onto his own. Pyanfar's mate, Khym, although in exile from his own lands, would be safe with Kohan.*

*Thus was Pyanfar freed to return to Gaohn Station to settle the Outsider matter, and none too soon. She rejoined* The Pride *to find that in her absence the kif had made their first strike. . . .*

She had had no choice in going home to Chanur, because a hani would go on with challenge while the house caught fire, until the fire singed his own hide. Hani always went their own way, disdaining Outside concerns, pricklish about admitting they would not be in space at all but for the mahendo'sat explorers who had found them—but that was so. And hani went on doing things the old way, the way that had worked when there were no colonies and no outside trade; when hani were the unchallenged owners of the world and hani instincts were suited to the world they owned.

But, gods, there were other ecosystems. In one unimagined hell, the kif way had worked best; and gods, even the chi way had worked somewhere, lunatic as they seemed, incomprehensible to outsiders.

Engine sound charged. Scan images were coming up on her screens, their position relative to the world and the station—a dot that was knnn-symboled hovering off apart from the chaos of other dots, two marked *mahe*, and the horrid hazard near the station, debris sweeps that marked the death of ships and the course of their remains.

"*Aja Jin* took damage," Tirun told her steadily. "Kif invaded traffic control on the station and knocked the scan out. We broke out of dock and ran with the rest . . . figured they were screening incoming ships. Strike came in three quarters of an hour ago. We're headed back in to station. Proceed?"

"Keep talking. Go as we bear." She reached and hit the motion warning. "We're moving," she said over allship.

Scan started acquiring data, positive ID's on hani ships. A solitary knnn zigged and darted at some velocity, throwing off small ghosts that indicated boosts. Pyanfar ran her tongue over her teeth, refusing that distraction, watching the pattern of those ships as yet unidentified.

"Captain," Tirun said. Three unidentifieds in the vicinity acquired the *enemy* designation. *Mahijiru* and *Aja Jin* swept toward the group.

"Knnn's coming up," Geran said sharply, and the proximity alarm beeped as the high-velocity ship ripped from tail to bow, nadir, gone into the developing *mahe*/kif confrontation so fast scan developed them a line of likely-course.

Scan showed debris. Hani, *mahe*, or kif was uncertain; positions were too close. Dots coincided and split as the kif moved toward them. Someone was hit;

and of a sudden the fight was headed *The Pride's* way.

"Akukkakk's *there*," Pyanfar said, beyond doubt that kif would rate *The Pride* his prime target, disregarding the *mahe* who had just attacked. "Take the best target. I can't tell." Hani jumpships were on the near-scan now, several of them, hammering toward intercept with the kif, but not in time for *The Pride*.

The kif ripped past them, zenith, and they fired. Screens broke up. Explosion slammed *The Pride* askew and redlighted the boards. Pyanfar reached in an adrenalin time-stretch, fought the pitch and wobble. In the screen's clearing a new rapid image bore down on them, a high knnn wail in com.

It went past them, zenith. Pyanfar spun *The Pride* one hundred eighty degrees in a tail roll, anticipating a return pass, hoping to get a shot off. *Mahijiru* and *Aja Jin* would come; were coming; might even come in time. *The Pride* fired back as the guns came in line; the kif had proceeded into turnover as their respective momentum separated them, and fire came back, broke up screens, redlighted the remaining clear boards.

"*Got* one," Geran yelled. "Look at that bastard wobble. By the gods we got him!"

Fire from the other kept up. The interval was still increasing between them, but at a slower rate. It would be coming back . . . soon.

"Goldtooth," Pyanfar said, punching in the com, "rot you, hurry it a bit, someone out there hurry it."

The knnn was pulling about in a tight turn, one of those maneuvers a knnn could survive and hani could not. It zigged into the line of fire.

"Good job," Goldtooth's voice reached *The Pride*. "Got—"

Com broke up. Scan suddenly went berserk, all the sensors blind . . .

. . . jump field. Gods, a jump field—in crowded space.

Something was *there*—where nothing had been; a massive presence, a vast blip on scan as it cleared, a monster located to starboard zenith. They were off their heading, displaced. Everyone was. Comp was flickering wildly tring to compensate. Pyanfar keyed into the system, trying to get sense out of it. Gods, the newcomer was *huge*.

"Captain." Haral's voice. Com went on broadcast again, a wailing chorus which overburdened the audio, wounding the ears.

The huge blip broke apart, fragmented: not debris, but discrete parts of which one stayed central and the rest sped outward.

"*Knnn*," Pyanfar breathed. "Travelling in synch. Gods help us all."

"*Hani*—" com crackled through the static, a familiar,

kifish voice. Akukkakk. *"Pyanfar Chanur—"*

The knnn ships moved together, headed for the kif; and all at once the kif's outgoing velocity began to show increase —Akukkakk had way and he was throwing everything he had into it. Retreating. Unable to boost up: the knnn were too close, and closer yet.

The solitary knnn ship zigged and darted and joined the chase.

*"Chanur!"* Goldtooth said.

Pyanfar watched the screens, frozen in place. The chase on scan gathered more and more velocity.

Of a sudden came another output, a signal which made no sense to comp: scan started blinking on the ship-sized object the knnn had left behind, asking operator intervention.

An alien voice came over com, Tully-like and frightened.

Pyanfar cast a glance at Tully, who clung sweating and jump-hocked to the edge of the com counter, whose eyes stared wildly as the voice kept going.

"## ship," translator rendered the transmission from the newcomer. "## ship ## you."

"Com!" Pyanfar yelled at Haral and got it. Her heart pounded against her ribs. "This is the hani ship *The Pride of Chanur.* You're in hani space. *Friend,* hear?"

"Captain," Tirun cried, "Captain, the knnn—"

She looked about again. Knnn closed with *Hinukku,* surrounded the kif, became one mass about it, as they had been massed about the Outsider ship at its arrival.

"They're *trading,*" Pyanfar said incredulously. "Like at Kirdu —gods, they're making a trade. An Outsider ship—for *Hinukku.* For Akukkakk."

*"Pyanfar!"* Goldtooth's voice came over com. *"You got sense these bastard?"*

"Human ship," Pyanfar said, punching in her still-active link. "The knnn just dropped a live cargo on us. Tully's kind. —They're still going, by the gods, the knnn are still going, outbound."

There was a sudden and major vacancy on scan, the characteristic scatter-ghost of a ship departed into jump—where the mass of knnn had been, enveloping *Hinukku.* A vast ghost, a ripple in space-time; and hard after it—a smaller ghost, their own knnn. Vanished.

The remaining kif kept going, headed for the far dark and sending out a steady signal, telling of disaster.

Running for their lives.

*"We got,"* Goldtooth said. "Got, *Pyanfar.*"

"Got. —Gods know what we've got." She heard Tully still chattering back and forth with the newcomer, heard lilts and tones in his speech she had never heard. She looked back at him, who had all but usurped

Haral's com board. He saw her. His face was wet. "Friend," he said to her in her own language. "All friend."

## VII

*The Pride* eased into dock. Behind it the Outsider arrived, cautiously . . . .

"We're going out there," Pyanfar said, thrusting back from the controls. "All of us, by the gods."

They came, off the bridge and long-striding down the corridor, Tully too; rode down the lift and marched out the lock.

"*Hani*," a *mahen* voice bellowed, and here came Goldtooth and crew, a dozen dark-furred, rifle-carrying mahendo'sat flooding toward them, towering over them. Goldtooth grabbed Pyanfar's hand and crushed it till claws reminded him to caution. He grinned and slapped her on the shoulder. "Got number one help, what I tell you?"

Hani were staring at this *mahe*-hani familiarity. Her own crew was. Pyanfar laid her ears back in embarrassment, recalled then what they owed Goldtooth and his unruly lot and pricked the ears up at once. More, she linked arms with the tall *mahe*, and gave the gawkers on dockside something proper to stare at. "Number one help," she said.

She looked at Tully, thinking of Chanur balance sheets, debits and credits. Looked at him looking at her with those odd pale eyes full of worship. Behind him an accessway had opened. His own kind had come, gods, a bewildering assortment: pale ones and dark ones and some shades in between.

He froze for the instant, then ran for them, hani-dressed and hani-looking, ran to his assorted comrades, who were clipped and shaved and clothed top and bottom in skintight garments, shod besides. Hands reached out to him; arms opened. He embraced them all and sundry and there was a babble of alien language which echoed off the overhead.

*So he goes,* Pyanfar thought with a strange sadness—and with a certain anxiety about losing a valuable contact to others—to Llun, by the gods, who would be eager to get their own claws in; and Kananm and Sanuum and some of the other competitors in port. Tully brought his people at least halfway when he saw her, came rushing up with fevered joy.

"Friend," he said, his best word, and dragged her reluctant hand toward that of a white-maned human, whose naked face was wrinkled as a kif's and tawny-colored like a hani's.

The captain, she thought; an old one. She suffered the handclasp with claws retracted, bowed and got a courteous bow in return.

"Want talk," Tully managed then. "Want understand you."

Pyanfar's ears flicked and lifted, the chance of profit within her reach after all. She puckered her mouth into its most pleasant expression. Gods, some of them were odd. They ranged enormously in size and weight and there were two radically different shapes. Female, she realized curiously; if Tully was male, then these odd types were the women.

"Captain," Haral said, touching her arm and calling her attention to a cluster of figures coming out of the dockside corridor.

Llun were on their way—Kifas Llun herself in the lead of that group, come to answer this uncommon call at Gaohn Station, a score of black-trousered officialdom trailing after her.

They would demand the translator tape, that was sure. Pyanfar thrust her hands into her waistband. "Friends," she assured Tully, who gave the approaching group anxious looks, and he in turn reassured his comrades.

Gods, she had no desire to deal with the Llun or anyone at the moment. Her knees ached, her whole body ached, from want of sleep and from strain. But she turned to the arriving Llun with a dazzlingly cheerful smile, fished the tape from her pocket and turned it over to Kifas at once.

"We register these good Outsiders, our guests, at Gaohn Station," Pyanfar said, "under Chanur sponsorship."

"Allies, *ker* Chanur?" There was a frown of suspicion on Kifas Llun's face. "Nothing the Tahar said weighs here now with us . . . but did you send for them?"

"Gods no. The knnn did that. Knnn who got a bellyful of kif intervention in their space, I'd guess; who found these Outsiders near their space and decided in their own curious fashion to see to it that they met reputable Compact citizens of a similiar biology—snatched them up in synch, they did, and they took the *hakkikt* out the same way, may they have joy of him. They're traders, you know, *ker* Llun, after their own lights. I'll wager our human friends here don't know yet what's happened to them or how far they are from home or how they got here. They'll have drugged down and ridden out the jumps it took to get them here; and gods know how many that was or from where."

"Introduce us," the Llun said.

"I'll remind you," Pyanfar said, "that we and they have gone through too many time changes. We're not up to prolonged formalities. They're Chanur guests; I'm sponsoring them; and I feel it incumbent on myself to see that they get their rest . . . but of course they'll

sign the appropriate papers."

"Introductions," the Llun said dryly, too old and too wise to be put off by that.

"Tully," Pyanfar said, "you got too rotted *many* friends."

They were, at least for the moment, effectively lost.

"We find home," Tully said, "not far from Meetpoint. Know this. Your record, your ship instruments—help us."

"Not difficult at all," Pyanfar said. "All we have to do is send your records through the translator and get our charts together, right? We come up with the answer in no time."

Tully came and went, among his human comrades, and on *The Pride*. He did not, to Pyanfar's surprise, cut his mane and beard and walk about in human clothes: he did go shod, but no more change than that.

For the sake of appearances, she thought; in respect of her onetime advice and the opinion of the Llun. Tully flourished—grinned and laughed and moved with a spring in his step quite strange in him. He brought a solemn trio of humans off their ship to take notes aboard *The Pride*—Goldtooth attended with his own records—to ask questions and to exchange data until they had some navigational referents in common.

They frowned suspiciously, these humans, but they stopped frowning when they learned precisely where home was—some distance beyond knnn space and kif.

"Got between," Tully said enthusiastically, jabbing the chart which showed hani and mahendo'sat territory, cupping one hand on the hani-mahendo'sat side and one hand on the human side, with the kif neatly between. The hands moved together slowly, clenched. "So."

In time, he went, back to his own . . . that last sealing of the lock which marked the separation of the human ship from Gaohn. *Ulysses*, its name was, which Tully had said meant *Far-Voyages*. Nearly fifty humans lived on it, and whether they were related or not, she could not determine.

They prepared to go. She started back across the docks to *The Pride*, to follow—with a smallish cargo, nothing of great mass, but items of interest to humans. There might be a chance to see Tully at voyage's end, but it would hardly be the same.

She planned to have use of that acquaintance, Tully—and the captain of this *Far-Voyages*. So, of course, did Goldtooth, with his sleek refitted ship, going with them, while Jik carried messages back to the Personage, no doubt, and the mahendo'sat tried to figure out how to cheat an honest hani out of exclusive arrangements.

But the odds in that encounter were even. ■

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# SUNWAIFS

## BY SYDNEY J. VAN SCYOC

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It's an axiom of science fiction that one day, humans will colonize other planets. But what if the planet in question doesn't want to be colonized?

## PROLOGUE
*NADD*

*I sit at my desk gazing at my rough-hewn wall and I wonder how many of the younger generation remember conditions as they once were on Destiny. Sometimes I feel our younger people are strangers: strangers to the reality that once ruled our villages so harshly, strangers to our hardships, our legends, even to the ceremonies and prayers of my own youth. And so I begin my account thus:*

Stranger, you stand upon the soil of Destiny. Aptly named, Destiny lies directly in the path our great-grandparents' ship took from Earth-Then. And despite Destiny's benevolent appearance now, it was not always a hospitable world. Even in my youth, not so many years ago, the web-rooted grasses of the meadow yielded access to the black soil reluctantly at planting time and grew back quickly, strangling newly planted crops. Periodically the entire plain was swept by flooding rains. Then mosses and fungi appeared and blossomed overnight, releasing spores that drove our livestock to furies of self-destruction. No, Destiny was not entirely hospitable. But when the pilgrims found their fuel supply dwindling, when they found their tempers growing as short as their vanishing food stocks, when every other planet they had probed on the long journey was either scalding desert or jungle hell—then Destiny became destiny. At first glance Destiny appeared well-met. Broad meadows spread from the heavy-booted feet of the pilgrims, the grasses emerald, green and lush. Smaller vegetation grew in glossy-leaved clumps, brittle foliage catching sunlight and shattering it like tiny mirrors, throwing it in brilliant shards across the grass. Such was Destiny at first glance.

Some of you may not know the story of the First Warning. Two days after landfall, shelters had begun to rise on the meadow. They were rude constructions, but they were the best our elders had been able to wrest from the hostile economy of Earth-Then. The ship was already partially dismantled; every component was to be used in the establishment of the colony. A joyful chorus rang from the morning air as men, women and youths worked to glorify the Secret Power. The younger children played in the meadow, shrieking at the clouds of sweet-voiced crybirds which had appeared from the trees.

But then, as if some indwelling demon were angered by the pilgrims' joy, the sky-face of Destiny changed. The lavender sky grew first violet, then indigo, and thunder rumbled ominously from clouds which had not been visible a quarter-hour before. In the distance lightning

gashed the dark sky and the subsequent thunder was followed by an unnatural stillness. Crying in alarm, the crybirds gathered into a flock and swooped away. They did not flee to the tall fingerpalms or to the densely cavernous bluewillows, but plunged to earth in a flock, disappearing into the deep grass of the meadow.

"The birds see danger coming," Youngfather Doss proclaimed. "We must take shelter."

Headfather Grumann concurred and raised up his mighty voice. "Shelter yourselves immediately, my people. A storm comes to challenge our right here."

And so the pilgrims huddled near their half-finished structures, some packed into shipping containers, others crouched beneath heavy tarpaulins, and watched cloudy indignation sweep across Destiny's skybrow. The storm stalked the distance on flickering white legs, grumbling. The lightning moved into the colony grounds and snapped angrily at the main dome, the colony's one substantial structure. With a single stroke, it melted not only the plastic panes that had been fitted into place, but those still stacked on the ground. Next the storm moved to sample the ship itself, bellowing with stormy rage at its presence on the plain.

Destiny had thrown her first tantrum for the human party. She had warned them with fire and rain of her displeasure at their intrusion.

But she had warned them too late. The pilgrims had neither ship nor fuel to flee this cruel Destiny. However reluctantly, they were committed to struggle upon her web-meadow, victims of her storm-fury and her cold rains of rage.

Committed, and there they struggled for two centuries. They ripped back the grasses to plant their crops, only to have the wiry roots creep back within weeks, choking their fields. When morning dew was heavy or when rain was newly fallen, they woke to a world smothered in green mosses, brown mildews and fast-forming fungi. Pillows and crusts of emerald, dun, violet, and black formed upon every surface.

True, crybirds appeared almost immediately to feed upon the mosses and fungi, but well before noon of a wet day the first spores matured. They spewed through the air, an invisible tide. Then the cattle lowed ominously and tried to break down their fences to dash their heads against the tree trunks. Porkers snapped at their bellies, and the weakest among the settlers struggled to destroy themselves. Not until the crybirds had completely devoured the spewing mosses and fungi and the palemoths had strained the tide of spores from the air would

the settlers be free of another suicidal storm.

Hopeless, you say? Their existence an exercise in futility? Certainly the bleakness of their new lives smothered joy. Within a single generation the pilgrims became a grim society of harsh patriarchs, gaunt women, and frightened children. Their chants and hymns grew stone-heavy; pleasure became a perversion, worship a duty, suffering a birthright. Only the mystic core of their faith remained untouched. In the dead of night men, women, and children lay awake listening for the whispering voice of guidance, hungry for some promise of salvation.

Ironically, when salvation finally came it was almost squandered through ignorance and the joyless rule of dogmatism. And now I see signs that a second generation of saviors is to be born, as different from the first generation as the settlers of today are different from their grim-jawed predecessors. And although these new saviors may appear as frightening creatures, barely human, you must be prepared to nurture them through their dependent years, to accept the gifts they thrust upon you, however bizarre, and to exploit their offerings for the greater good of all Destiny's people. They wait in the wings, these new saviors, fleshed by the sun, nurtured by the moon. If you do not permit them to carry you forward at the crest of their tide, you may destroy them—and they you.

And so I am asking Corrie to help me chronicle the development of the first generation of saviors. These pages will provide a poor guideline to the development of the second generation—but this is the only guideline you are likely to have. Read carefully, reflect, and prepare.

*CORRIE*
**DESTINY YEAR 0212**

To save you from drowning in Nadd's sentimental prose, and partly because I find the task appealing, I agreed to contribute certain chapters to the proposed narrative.

At the time my story begins, Destiny children were conceived to be born during the winter recess, when their mothers were not needed in the fields. The first recorded sunstorms occurred in the month of our conception. For no conceivable reason, arms of brilliance flared angrily from the sun. Loops and whorls appeared, cosmic tatting decorating the sun's gassy body.

The eruptions marked a year already badly launched. Late winter storms had flooded Dorsonville and Henches' Plowbourne. Lightning had ignited homes and granaries in every community, and livestock had

been driven into frenzied panic. After the storms every surface was padded with swift-growing mosses and fungi. They released their maddening spores and by Destiny-February, the designated month of conception, the settlers' strength was drained. There were the mad to be protected, injured stock to be butchered and smoked, and soon it would be time to rip web-grass from the fields again for spring planting. In the midst of this turmoil, the sunstorms were noted briefly in Headfather Dressler's log, scarcely noticed by the distracted settlers.

The first clear warning of disaster came with the late spring birth of monster porkers. They appeared in the mucking yards baroquely malformed, many scarcely recognizable as porklings. Headfather Dressler ordered them destroyed immediately, as if their very presence was a threat. His orders were carried out grimly, and afterward prayer rumbled through every cottage.

After the disaster of the porkers the cattle were watched closely. Their lowing hung over the communities like a dirge. At midsummer moribund calves were born, dozens upon dozens of them, dying with their first breaths, their spindly limbs malformed, their heads grotesque. From the herds of all the communities no more than thirty-score calves survived, and half those were subsequently destroyed.

Was there some single agent that afflicted both porkers and cattle? Did they share some common vulnerability never evident until now?

But no. Headfather Dressler studied every text the original pilgrims had carried to Destiny. Soon he recognized the nature of the disaster. During the critical months of February and March, the storming sun had thrown out unusual concentrations of radiation. It had penetrated husks and nests, mucking yards and barns alike, to warp unhatched moths and birds, unborn porkers and cattle.

And now the women of the communities were committed to advanced pregnancies. Ironically, this year of all years the Secret Power had conferred almost universal fertility. Even the maids and the mauds, pubescent girls too young for marriage and older women mateless through widowhood or failure to marry, had been almost universally impregnated by dutiful youngfathers.

Fortunately many of these miscarried in the mid-stages of pregnancy. But by late summer the Council knew that monster births were imminent and declared Council guardianship of every infant to be born that winter. No parent must wrestle alone with the onerous decision whether to preserve or destroy.

And so the women were secluded, and the colony waited in agony for us to be born.

*Us?* Do I validly categorize *us* with *them*? Or should I deal separately with the fifty-odd who were ultimately consigned to cages and the three hundred others who had the good grace to die soon after birth? Let me term them us, and us them, for a few paragraphs more. One of the stillborns was my own twin, a circumstance Nadd insists has contributed to certain rifts in my character.

One by one we appeared, three hundred sixty-two of us, and were whisked to a special nursery built beyond Drae's Crossroads. We lay in trestled baskets in a dirt-floored storage house, wailing thinly. Imagine a malformation: it appeared in at least one infant, usually in more than one. And worse than the grotesque were the pitiful.

Only six of the entire crop appeared normal, or relatively so: Ronna, Trebb, Nadd, Feliss, Herrol, myself. We were set aside in a special row and attended with special concern while the dozen nurses treated the others with a species of silent neglect. Feedings were forgotten. Tiny bodies were left unprotected against the night chill. Remediable defects were not treated. Within weeks three hundred sixty-two had become two hundred forty, one hundred twenty-five, then one hundred. The count lingered there stubbornly for several months.

Five weeks after the last birth, the six of us were taken to a smaller nursery specially prepared for us. There we practiced our newly focused eyesight upon painted walls and sanded wooden floors, amenities few Destiny infants knew. Soft blankets and fuzzy garments were lavished upon us. The cooing faces of our nurses hung over us.

Faces. Who says I can't remember Headfather Dressler's expression when he came to examine me soon after we were moved to the new nursery? He hung sternly over my crib, his brow etched with some private pain, as a tense young nurse drew back my gown and cottie, exposing me. Headfather Dressler peered down at me, stroking his full white beard, frowning.

"Both?" he demanded finally, distaste tugging his shaggy white brows. "Why wasn't this aberration reported to me sooner? Why has this infant been termed normal and brought here? Of necessity a normal infant must be either male or female."

At that point Healer Caine appeared, clasping his lame left hand, his white robes billowing like wings. "No, no, Headfather, this condition is fully remediable," he declared, projecting hearty certainty. "We have only to decide which we want, male or female, and dress

the child accordingly. In a few years it will *be* whatever we term it, male or female."

"It will be neither," Headfather Dressler crackled.

"Both," the nurse corrected tensely.

Headfather Dressler snorted, his larval brows crawling. Briefly his eyes clouded with pain, and he touched his abdomen, as if in entreaty. "And who would ever pair with it?" he demanded when color returned to his lips. He paced away across the nursery, his boots thumping heavily. "It would be a maud from the time it left the nursery, Healer." Slowly he trudged back until his massive face hung over my basket again. Stony eyes peered down into mine, never guessing their image would be retained. "No, either you scalpel it into a recognizable female or it returns to the other nursery." Here his granite face softened slightly. "And that would be a shame. Three males, three females—they are matched. Matched from birth." Now his eyes snared Healer Caine's reluctant gaze. "Can it be done?"

"It—of course," that good man asserted, and three days later it was done. The surgery was crude, given Healer Caine's disability, but I am a woman now, at least outwardly.

Feliss, Ronna, Herrol, Trebb, Nadd, myself: sometimes even I can summon a certain sentimentality about our infancy. We were waifs of the sunstorm. Our parents never knew us. Our brothers and sisters never touched us; our aunts never cuddled us. Instead nurses hung over us day and night. During that first year, aside from my own offending organs, our small idiosyncracies seemed not to matter. We were testimony that even the worst disaster yields some good. The Secret Power had not deserted the people. He had fought the sun for us and we lived.

Another spring, a normal one this time, and we were briefly the subjects of controversy. If we were perfect, why weren't we returned to our parents? What right had the Council to retain us without even notifying individual parents that their own were among the survivors?

What right, Headfather Dressler countered, had six families to joy while the majority mourned? We were diverse enough that any family could secretly consider one of us its own. Better to raise us as originally intended: wards of the community, sons and daughters to all. Then no family need taste the bitter certainty that its own offspring was dead.

A just decision.

Perhaps.

*NADD*
**DESTINY YEAR 0217**

I recall the first summers of

our childhood with bucolic sentimentality. The grasses grow high and sweet, yielding playfully to the flirting breezes. Then from nearby Drae's Crossroads comes a coven of day-pilgrims, the women and children in long black robes, the elders and youngfathers stern in white muslin—all of them bound for the sanctified stream that runs beyond our cottage, where they will fast and pray the day. As they chant their way down the narrow path, crybirds and palemoths splash a rainbow across the morning sky, a pagan celebration.

Often on Destiny, summer afternoons suddenly grow deathly still. Then great cloudfaces appear on the horizon, scowling across the plain. When this happened, our nurses, Nira and Larissa, Daya and Miss would hurry the six of us into the cottage. There we crouched together at the end of the dark hall, trembling with anticipation as the sky bellowed and rain swept noisily against the roof.

But I proceed as if you know us, as if you can clearly picture each of us. Stop for a moment, close your eyes, and let me paint images for you. First Feliss: she is tiny, her eyes are bright and mischievous, her approach to life flirtatious. Her hair is black and fine and scatters about her head when she moves. She always moves within a halo of crybirds, and sometimes, when the sun strikes her bare arms, they seem to be plumed in a rainbow brilliance that matches the plumage of the birds.

Trebb is long and lanky. His hair is sandy, his eyes green; his face is long and thin and the features are in constant motion, reacting to the rapidly changing scene. He seldom stays in one spot long enough to bring his scattered attention to focus. In some ways he is like a rapidly growing vine, constantly sending out tendrils, spreading restlessly in every direction, yet without ever achieving any real depth or penetration.

Herrol is our bull, with thick neck, massive shoulders, hefty arms and legs. His eyes are dark and perennially belligerent. He lows instead of speaking, and his gaze is a threat. At first glance you note the hair that grows low on his forehead, the broad nose, the densely muscled jawline. Upon closer examination you find that his nails are the color of mud and that dark hair grows down the backs of his hands to his fingertips.

Ronna is as unprepossessing as Herrol. Her dust-brown hair falls in feathery streamers, like plumes that have been dragged in the dirt. Her skin is muddy brown and dapples white when she is chilled or apprehensive. Her eyes are dull and brown. Normally they have two moods: apprehension and apathy. She is dull, brown, inward.

Corrie is a paradox of gender, her face sometimes hard with emotion more suited to a fledgling youngfather, at other times unbearably tender. But the object of her tenderness is not likely to be a nestling crybird finding its wings or the lavender shadow cast by a distant golden cloud. Instead it will be a groundweasel gorging himself on writhing slugworms or a palemoth desperately flapping torn wings against the afternoon breeze. And Corrie's perverse tenderness can turn to chilly rage in an instant.

Myself? I'll let Corrie describe me, unflatteringly I'm sure.

By now you have probably already paired us: Feliss and Trebb, the one mischievous, the other never still; Ronna and Herrol, both dull and inarticulate; and Corrie and myself, her intensity balancing my timidity. By the time we could totter across our nursery floor, our nurses had made the same three pairings. If Herrol crouched in a corner hammering his woolybear against the wall, Larissa or Daya would quickly snatch Ronna from the window and deposit her beside him. If Trebb racketed through the playroom, Feliss was urged to pursue him, shrieking. And if I studied a picture book, soon Corrie was plopped down beside me with a rebuking "Here, Nadd. You must not leave your girlie alone." Trapped, I would peer up into Corrie's turbulent eyes and squirm, reading things there that made me whimper.

Or Corrie would be intent upon the slow destruction of some plaything, only to have it whisked away and myself offered as a more fit diversion. Then her black eyes would flare and her nostrils would dilate with desire to pick me apart tissue by tissue. But if I backed away, our keepers scurried me forward again. They giggled when Corrie snatched my arm and bit it. "He must learn to defend himself," Larissa observed primly, while Miss and Daya laughed. "After all, when they grow up . . ."

Defend myself? Against a black-eyed fury who had spent her final months *in utero* with her twin floating lifelessly at her face? Apparently I was the only one who wondered how he/she had died. Grimly I imagined wiry fetal hands groping through the bath of amniotic fluid, seeking prey, and I recoiled from Corrie's fierce black eyes.

"See him squirm? He'll never get away from her." More gales of laughter.

Fools.

Or was I the fool, to think I could escape? To think any of us could throw off the invisible filaments that already bound us? We learned that despite Corrie's destructiveness, despite Feliss's mischief and Trebb's restlessness, despite Ronna's dull ug-

liness and Herrol's bullish rages, despite my prickly righteousness, we could expel no one from our group. And no one could withdraw.

Until we were six our routine seemed pleasant enough. But soon after our sixth birthday, I realized that, while children from the Crossroads joined in chapel worship and participated in pilgrimages, the six of us never did so. And it wasn't long before I recognized other differences, disturbing differences, both in myself and in the others. When we played in the meadow, webgrass curled lovingly around Trebb's ankles and crybirds followed Feliss wherever she ran. Certainly no pilgrim child commanded such tribute. Yet the highest power of all ignored us.

Hesitantly I began to question Nira. She brushed off my queries with an evasive frown. Finally, one day as she shook out the linens, I demanded furiously, "Is the Secret Power punishing us for some offense? I've called to Him every night this week and He's never even whispered an answer. And when I asked the others, they said He doesn't whisper to them either. Trebb said—"

Nira rounded on me, her eyes widening in offense. "Never say that again," she rapped. "He whispers to everyone, even the offender and the outcast. You simply haven't listened, Nadd. You haven't attuned yourself properly; none of you have."

"But how will any of us learn to hear Him if we're never permitted to make a pilgrimage?" I persisted. Her lips bunched in a tight knot, and I knew she was going to evade me.

"I have no time to discuss this now, Nadd. If you don't hear, it's because you haven't consecrated yourself to hear. You're only a child, after all. And as to the pilgrimages, look to yourself for the reason you've never been called to join one. Look to your brothers and sisters." And she hurried away, her lips drawn into a thin white line.

Crushed, I was forced to look. I tried to imagine Feliss stumbling meekly down the path in a black robe with peaked cowl. Instead I saw her bounding away through the grass, wrapping herself up tightly in the consecrated garment and throwing herself into the shadows of a bluewillow, choking with laughter. I pictured Trebb's long limbs entangled in black as he capered away from the coven to run after Feliss. I imagined Corrie glowering at the elders and refusing to prostrate herself with the other children.

And so, very soon after my awakening, I faced the fact that during our first few years we had been gradually consigned to isolation: social, spiritual, educational. Our special nursery had become an orphanage so slowly even our attendants had

hardly noticed the change. The outer communities had largely forgotten us, and the people of Drae's Crossroads, I realized heavily, sensed our alienness and regarded us with something closer to fear than curiosity or warmth.

That summer brought increasingly frequent parties of day-pilgrims past our yard. It also brought decreased vigilance on the part of our nurses. The winter before, the Council had determined that Nira, Larissa, Daya, and Miss could no longer be excused from productivity. And so, at the proper time, each of them had disappeared to the maiding house for a rendezvous with a masked youngfather.

With summer Nira grew increasingly tense, her face aging into a grim mask. Larissa and Daya dwindled to pale gauntness, as if they fed their growing pregnancies at the cost of their once-sleek limbs. Only Miss blossomed with pregnancy. She was gripped by an unnatural euphoria and danced around the cottage singing inanely.

Accordingly, our keepers were not alert when a large party of pilgrims passed the play yard one morning, filling the summer air with their litany. I gazed after them, suffering my exclusion keenly. If I stepped into the path and begged to accompany them, the children would shrink from me, the women would edge away nervously, and the eldest pilgrim would reject my plea with a stern flip of his hand. None of them would recognize my common humanity. My chin trembling, I turned and crept away from the fence.

Minutes later I heard Feliss shrill from the meadow. Whirling, I saw Trebb, Corrie, and Feliss race through the high grass that skirted the path, a cloud of crybirds swooping after them, the grasses themselves celebrating their passage, whirling into crazy-lace patterns either side of their running feet. I stood paralyzed on the classroom steps, staring after them, unexpectedly gripped by a vision of terrible clarity: the chanting pilgrims, the rioting forms, the celebrating birds and the dancing grasses—and completing the pattern, disaster, like an imperfectly defined storm cloud hanging over the scene.

I hesitated on the steps. If I ran after the others, if I called them back to the play yard, if I prevented the dark cloud from towering toward its storming climax— But did I trust my vision? I debated for only a moment, then yielded to the compelling fear that gripped me. Desperately I clattered down the steps and hurtled across the play yard. As I ran across the meadow, I called hoarsely,

A white-robed youngfather turned and stared blankly at me, his senses anesthetized by the

chant. I threw myself into the grass and hid until the pilgrims' litany faded in the distance. Then I stood and cautiously surveyed the meadow. Far ahead, I picked out three bobbing heads.

I reached them a few minutes later, guided by the strange agitation of the grasses and by the flock of birds that surged around them, a mobile rainbow. As I approached, Feliss rolled herself into a ball and threw herself into the grass, her head tucked under one arm. Immediately the crybirds swept into the grass and settled in brilliant balls all around her, lavender, scarlet, emerald, gold.

Confused, I peered at the sky. But no storm gathered. Abruptly Corrie laughed and snatched up a single golden ball of feathers. Her fingers closed tight, crushing the bird's fragile bones. "We're making a pilgrimage to the stream, Nadd," she challenged, her eyes as old as the ages, as old as death.

"No," I breathed, staring at the dead creature in her hand. "No. No one invited you. And I see—"

"Don't tell us what you see," Corrie commanded impatiently. "We have eyes of our own, and we're going to the water, where the pilgrims are. There's no reason we can't."

"The water, the water," Trebb chanted, flinging out his arms. Grass rippled in confusion, dancing away from him in agitated whorls. "Feliss! Race you!"

With an incontinent shriek, Feliss leapt to her feet and danced away after him. Corrie seared me with a defiant gaze, then ran after them both, her long black hair flowing. I stared down at the dead crybird she had tossed aside, then peered after the three of them. Three children ran under a lavender sky, the meadow grasses surging wildly to mark their passage, a brilliant cloud of birds swooping after them. But I did not see beauty; I saw disaster, its dimensions still undefined, yet its presence clear, immediate and real.

Heavy with doom, torn by it, I ran back to the cottage, threw myself into bed and huddled under the prickly covers, whispering wildly to the Secret Power to guide me. Abruptly my prayers turned fierce. If I could not see clearly, I didn't want to see at all. I didn't want to be tormented by dimly apprehended shapes sweeping inexorably toward me. Instead I begged the Secret Power Himself to color my perceptions, to shape my vision, to lift the terrible burden of this anomalous gift from my shoulders.

I pleaded and I prayed. For answer I received silence and a continuing sense of doom.

*CORRIE*
**SPRING 0217**

Running after Feliss and Trebb,

I picked my way through a bramble of brightbushes and crawled into a dense thicket of drooping bluewillow branches. Penetrating it, I found myself on hands and knees in a musty cavern of foliage. Grey moss grew everywhere, curtaining out sunlight, creating a musty pall in the air. Even the broad leaves of the occasional fingerpalms were coated with unfamiliar mossy growth.

I sucked a deep breath and analyzed the mingled scents of the streamside: mud, decay, and an unfamiliar spicy aroma. Then from somewhere nearby I heard a murmur. With a tingling sense of unreality, I pawed my way through the sheafs of moss that hung from every branch. It tore easily in my hands, showering my coveralls with grey dust.

Nearby brush rustled, and Feliss popped into view, her black eyes round with fright. Simultaneously Trebb appeared from behind a tree, his eyes as huge as Feliss's.

"Where are the pilgrims?" I asked.

Feliss shook her head, her fine black hair falling across her shallow forehead. "I don't know," she said querulously. "I don't like it here, Corrie. I don't understand why you wanted to come here."

"You could have stayed at the cottage," I hissed. "You didn't have to come just because of me."

Trebb summed up the situation succinctly, cutting her protest short. "It stinks here."

"You smell the dead leaves rotting. And the moss—" Frowning, I ripped down a clinging grey beard and shook it, creating a cloud of dust. I inhaled experimentally, my fingertips tingling with the onset of numbness. The aroma was cloyingly spicy. And suddenly, as if the grey dust were affecting my senses, my voice seemed to come from very far away. "The moss smells like spice and mold. The moss—" I peered at it, expecting to see it float away across the muddy water. "Shake the moss, Trebb," I said distantly. "Shake it before I float too far away." Was this why I had come to the trees? This floating sense of timelessness?

His face loomed preternaturally large in the dim air. His eyes huge and solemn, he pulled down a beard of moss and swished it through the air.

"Smell it," I urged him as I inhaled again, my voice faint.

"It—" Bracing himself, he sniffed sharply at the grey dust. Then, smiling inanely, he sniffed again. "It smells—"

"It smells bad," Feliss whimpered.

My own voice said dreamily, "It smells good, 'Liss. Try it."

"Try it, 'Liss, try it," Trebb urged, a half-drunken chant. "It feels good when you try it, 'Liss." His thin lips twisting into

an inane grin, he broke free a fat sheaf of moss and shook it at her.

Feliss retreated from him, squealing with fright. "I don't want to smell it, Trebb. It smells rotten. It smells terrible. And I don't like it here. Everything feels funny here."

With a yelp of laughter, Trebb lurched after her, pawing aside curtains of moss. I plunged discoordinately after them, sucking the cloying dust into my lungs. With every step, I lifted my feet a meter into the air and set them down with a hilarious slap. I was barely aware of drunken laughter burbling from my lips. "Try it, 'Liss," I raved. "Doncha wanna fly away with me?"

The drunken chase resolved into slow motion, an airy thrashing of attenuated limbs, a series of incoherent squeals. Abruptly Feliss succumbed to the effects of the spore-cloud we had stirred up under the trees and threw herself to the ground in a tightly curled ball.

"Birdie!" Trebb shrilled as she rolled away under a brightbush. Quickly he wrapped his own limbs around his body and rolled away after her.

I slowed and stopped, and it suddenly seemed very still under the trees. I closed my eyes, listening intently. I heard a voice speaking to me from the very depths of time, a compelling voice, the voice of the stream that ran beneath the trees—that had always run there, eternal, fluid, yet never-changing. Heeding its call, I turned, slowly, slowly, magnetized. I stumbled to the stream bed and stretched out on my stomach, reaching for the water, for time. All my perceptions altered, I studied the water like some mysterious fluid I had never seen before. It slipped through my fingers like a lifestream that nourished but could never be possessed, like the soil's own sweet blood, flowing thick and brown and cool from the earth's subterranean heart-spring.

When I had dandled both arms in the mysteriously changed water, I slid forward in the mud and flicked my hair into the stream. The water tugged at it, bathing my scalp, cooling it. *I baptize myself in your blood-water, Mother Destiny,* some voice within me declared, wakened by my changed perception of the water, of the world. For only when time telescoped could I see that inert soil and mindless-flowing water were indeed animate, sentient—powerful. And I, who ran on rapid feet, whose perceptions came and went within the space of a second, was no more than a mote of life floating helplessly in a shaft of eternal sunlight. *See how I crawl to you, see how I give myself to you. Bleed through my hands, bleed into my hair, pour our your sustenance for your loving daughter,* I pleaded, eager to taste the eternity of the

waters, to make it mine. *Bleed for me, my Mother.*

And she did. As I sprawled in spore-fostered incoherence in the water, she fed me placidly; she fed me well; she fed me as a mother feeds her daughter, sweetly. She fed me time; she fed me eternity; she fed me the very stuff of forever.

At last I was sated. I crawled away from the water and threw myself into a pile of rotting leaves, staring up at the faint pattern of light created as the sun tried to finger through the dense bower of trees to touch me. Blandly I watched its futile efforts to lay rods of light across my face. Then I dozed.

Finally Feliss squirmed near me and said softly, "I'm a birdie person. Did you know that, Corrie?"

With effort I lifted my head. Focusing my eyes, I studied her as she sat there, rainbow crybirds perched upon her shoulders and her head.

"Did you know I'm a birdie person?" Feliss demanded again, peering at me. "I command all the birdies. When I call them they come, and when I tell them to fly away they go."

"I know it," I murmured, and wondered how I had known it.

"And Trebb is a grassy person and a tree person. Everything green grows for him, all the meadows, all the forests."

"Then what is Corrie?" Trebb demanded in a muffled voice.

"What are you, Corrie?" Feliss wondered, his echo.

"I—" I blinked around the mossy cavern that enclosed us. "I'm opposition," I said, not certain the reply made sense. It came of its own volition. "I'm the opposition of forces. I'm my Mother's child and my Father's child. My Mother feeds me and my Father warms me. My Father Sun warms the land and my Mother cools the air. My Father pulls the clouds up into the sky and my Mother draws them down again in rain. Then my Father booms and my Mother crackles. She scratches her hide with lightning and my Father scolds her with thunder—"

"It's not seemly to scratch," Feliss informed me. "But if my skin was mud and grass—"

"Her skin is mud and grass and rock. Her muscles are mountains and valleys and meadowlands. Somewhere there is a spring, and that is her heart. It pumps her blood through all the streams that are her veins. It pumps her blood to me and I drink it. I wash my face in it; I wash my hair in it. I splash her blood on my clothes. A long time ago I drowned my brother and sister in it. My brother, my Father's frowning son, and my sister, my Mother's smiling daughter—they were one person and I'm one person. I'm one person and two, even if Headfather Dressler did try to murder my Father's son."

Time passed and I told them the tale of creation. Time passed and Feliss told us why the crybirds fly and why they sing. Time passed and Trebb murmured tales of the meadow grasses and their eternal union. I swept wind over the land; Feliss beckoned up clouds of crybirds to ride the wind; and Trebb bade the grasses to bow and dance before it.

Then, through some intricate internal evolution, the time for dreaming passed, and we stood. We were sated with ecstatic insights. We moved upstream until we found ourselves at the mouth of a ghostly clearing. Brush had been uprooted from beneath the trees and the lower limbs of the bluewillows had been amputated to form a deep moss-hung cavern. The perimeter of the clearing was marked by a coven of abandoned robes, black and white, hung upon brush and limbs. Hoods and arms splayed, they were so many muslin skins abandoned in the wilderness.

Silently I gestured for Feliss and Trebb to halt. Alone, I crept forward into the silent clearing. Mud-coated forms lay naked upon broad couches of rotting leaves. Male and female, elders, youngfathers, mothers and children sprawled together under the trees, their intertwined limbs weaving them into a common humanity. They lay with eyes open and glassy, peering up into the moss-hung trees. A faint breeze stirred their ghostly robes and circulated motes of grey dream-dust through the air. My breath caught; I stared at their slowly writhing lips and realized they were joined in an inaudible chant.

My gaze shifted to the muddy streambank. Pilgrims lay there too, their fingers trailing in the water, blissful abstraction rendering their disparate faces identical. With rising gorge I stared at their pallid bodies, coated with my Mother's slippery brown blood.

"They're stealing her blood," I muttered. "And they're using her trees as a cathedral to their god." I expected to find my own rage mirrored in Feliss's eyes, in Trebb's. Instead they peered at me quizzically, their usually bright gazes dulled by the spicy dream-dust that hung in the air.

"The pilgrims are drinking the blood that should flow to the meadow grasses," I urged in a hypnotic undertone. "They're sucking it into their sinful-naked bodies, Trebb, sopping it up to feed their own weedy growth. When the stream comes out of the trees, it will be no more than a trickle, and all the grasses will have nothing to drink but the rain. And when it rains, the pilgrims will set out their rain barrels and steal every drop for themselves. Then the grasses will wither and dry. The grasses will brown and burn—"

Trebb's eyes had grown huge and glazed. "And the trees?" he demanded. "The trees?" He peered intently at me, and asked again, his voice rough with emotion, "The trees?"

"See for yourself," I said. "The pilgrims are lapping up the water that belongs to the trees too. If the pilgrims suck up all the water, the trees will shrivel and die. Without the water all the trees will soon be gone, the bluewillows, the fingerpalms—"

"There'll be nothing good left!" Trebb cried. "If we let the pilgrims drink all the water, there'll be nothing good left for the plants and the birds." Wildly he peered around the clearing. His inflamed gaze clawed high into the trees, counting every brutally amputated limb, and he began to flex his arms and legs rhythmically. An absence came into his eyes, as if he had fled his strangely thrashing body and invested himself elsewhere.

At the angry rattling sound overhead, I stared up and, fascinated, saw the rhythm of Trebb's limbs repeated in the limbs of the trees. Angrily, violently, they swayed and dipped, their mossy grey beards shaking with ancient rage. At the edges of the clearing, brightbushes rattled their mirror-leaves in anger and vines snarled and tangled rabidly, reaching out for human flesh.

Feliss shrieked in blood-joy and shook clouds of crybirds into the air. "I can do it too, Trebb! I can do it with my birds!" As she crowed and called, inciting them, the birds darted at the entranced pilgrims and began pecking at their naked bodies.

Pain-prodded from the depths of reverie, the pilgrims were driven groaning to their hands and knees, to their feet. Instinctively they clasped at their private parts, trying to protect them from the vicious rainbow that swirled through the clearing. Fear-eyed, they peered up into the agitated trees, peered down at the thick vines that had snaked from the shadows to snarl at their feet. Their eyes were hollow with incomprehension.

Groaning with terror, they ran into the narrow band of vegetation that separated them from the meadow. We ran after them, three young furies. Feliss screamed and Trebb cried, and the limbs of the trees reached down to slash naked flesh. The crybirds harried the fleeing pilgrims with grating cries.

I emerged from the shadow of the trees and viewed the massacre with a heady sense of creation. The pilgrims had stolen time and revelation from me, splashing their naked bodies with it. Now their bodies were wet with blood instead. And ecstatically I sensed an intensified celebration of power rising upon the horizon. The grey dust had activated abilities rooted so deeply within my unconscious

that I had never guessed they existed. I raised my arms, and clouds of vapor were whipped from the soil and sucked up into the late afternoon sky. I flicked my wrists, and the moisture condensed into an ominous line of black cloudlets. I splayed my fingers, and the dense little clouds diffused into towering grey thunderheads. They blew swiftly from the horizon to blanket the meadow, turning the sky midnight dark. I shrieked with joy. Then, as I ran, whooping with exhilaration, I heard the first crackle of thunder, saw the first shimmering finger of lightning, felt the first drop of rain on my mud-crusted cheek.

I had summoned the storm.

The pilgrims turned fear-haggard faces to the driving rain as they struggled against the writhing grasses that clutched at their feet. I shrieked, and swiftly lightning reached down and tasted ground around them. Thunder rolled, the voice of an angry headfather admonishing his errant young. With whimpers and groans the pilgrims threw themselves flat upon the ground. They scrabbled at Mother Destiny's pelt, cowering before the anger of the skies, crying to their Secret Power to deliver them.

"Run! The storm won't hurt us," I called to Trebb and Feliss. With a cry of exhilaration, I led them through the grass toward the footpath, leaping over the prostrate bodies of pilgrims. Trebb and Feliss darted after me. Shrieking with wild joy, the three of us—the *four* of us, Father Sun—plunged through the storm, invulnerable to the tongues of death that tasted earth behind us.

Reaching the path, we ran until our breath was a hard pain in our chests. Then we slowed to a trot and finally to a walk. Behind us, the worst fury of the storm gradually dissipated, raining away into the trees. Slowly bleak forms rose from the meadow. They stared after us with dead eyes, their punctures and lacerations dripping scarlet.

Slowly my head settled firmly back onto my shoulders; my limbs ceased to float. And the grasses had grown taller and lusher. Our cottage lay ahead. I caught my breath and a finger of anxiety touched me. The storm had passed and I was young again, vulnerable again. "Nira," I said involuntarily. Of all our attendants, she was the one to reckon with.

"She'll thrash us tonight, no matter what Headfather Jones says," Feliss moaned, peering at me from beneath strands of wet black hair.

"No one will ever believe what the pilgrims tell on us," I said strongly. "Because now we know what everyone else knows: there's madness under the streamside trees. The pilgrims

go there to breathe dream-dust and draw mystical revelations. When we're accused, we'll say we were only walking through the meadow from the picnic grove and ran home when we saw rain coming. If the pilgrims saw us walking, if they attach some fantasy of persecution to our presence—"

"But don't use those words, Corrie," Feliss urged, hope bringing the sparkle back to her eyes.

"I'll say it in child words," I promised, making my jaw hard. "I'll lisp if I have to, and you'll giggle, Feliss, and Trebb will hoot and run around."

"And no one will ever know their stories are all true," Trebb concluded triumphantly.

"No one," I agreed. We would dash into the play yard wet and flushed with youthful innocence. We would shed our wet clothes on the stoop and run to towel ourselves and put on dry clothes. By the time the pilgrims straggled back to Drae's Crossroads with their tale of trees gone mad, of crybirds attacking in waves, of children calling down storm from the sky, we would be innocently at our supper. After the first wave of hysteria passed, the pilgrims' wounds would be explained away as a manifestation of spore-madness, as would their incoherent tale. No one could ever know that everything they said was true.

*NADD*
**SPRING 0217**

At the supper table I hunched over my porridge mug, too miserable with intimations of doom to plumb the nervous excitement I sensed at the table. Corrie, Feliss, and Trebb had returned just as Daya was warming the pot. Nira had not quarantined them to the linen closet, despite their wet hair and mud-spattered faces, but had permitted them to put on fresh coveralls and come to the table. Through my own misery, I stared the length of the table at Nira. She peered into the fireplace, one hand resting on the slight mound of her pregnancy, her face drawn with some concern unrelated to us.

I had pushed my mug back and mouthed my ritual gratitude when Miss, who had flitted away from the table earlier to dance restlessly through the rooms of the cottage, suddenly appeared in the doorway. "Nira, Daya, Lariss—come see the pilgrims!" Her voice was high, flirting with hysteria.

Nira's features tightened into tense annoyance. "More nonsense," she declared, pushing back her chair. "Continue your devotions, kiddies."

Glancing down the table, I caught a spark of dark delight in Corrie's eyes. Feliss sucked a long breath, obviously fighting an attack of giggles, and

Trebb jumped up from the table and flung his limbs out in strange calisthenics. Only Herrol showed no reaction. A stab of apprehension blanched the blood from my face. Quickly I slid from my chair and ran after Nira.

The door into the play yard stood open. Framing myself in it, I stared unbelievingly at the cortege that wound up the path from the stream. Pilgrims staggered toward Drae's Crossroads in twos and threes, every one of them mother-naked. Mud was smeared across bare buttocks and abdomens. They bled from scores of oddly shaped punctures and lacerations. Haunted, they peered into the play yard as they passed. They did not chant; they did not even mutter.

At the sound of choked laughter, I turned to see Corrie pinch Trebb savagely. With a high-pitched giggle, Feliss slipped past them both and ran into the play yard. At her appearance, a haunted moan rose from the passing pilgrims.

Nira turned, her lips tightening. "Children, this is no sight for your eyes." In the dusk her complexion was so pale that it took a greenish cast. When we did not budge, she slapped her skirts around her ankles and strode toward us. "Into the linen closet—all of you!"

We hunched together in the closet for what seemed hours. Outside, first from the play yard, then from the classroom, I heard a deep rumble of voices and an occasional hysterical outburst, immediately muffled. Burdened with my own private misery, I crept to the closet door and laid my ear against the heavy wooden panel. Indistinctly I heard Nira's voice rising persuasively. It was immediately smothered in a babble of protest. Then deep voices again, stern and troubled by turns. The discussion went on for an hour or more, but I could not distinguish the words.

Nor could I read Nira's eyes when she finally released us much later. When she swung back the door and stood silhouetted in the opening, her spine stiff, shoulders rigid, I crouched against a shelf, expecting some denunciation. But although her features were grim and white, she said only, "Go to bed," and glided away down the hall without a backward glance.

We slipped warily to the bunkroom. Daya huddled in a chair near the door. As we entered the room, her eyes were round and glazed. "Put on your night clothes and say your devotions," she instructed, but numbly, as if she were too shocked to do more than mouth words.

Awed into compliance, we donned our nightgowns and knelt meekly beside our beds. Only Corrie glanced around with sardonic black eyes as we begged our Secret Power to whisper to us in the night.

Then for the second time that day I hid under my covers, sick with a sense of disaster. Bleeding pilgrims marched through my dreams, a series of ominous phantasms. Over and over the rumble and murmur of voices rose from the classroom. But if whatever had happened under the trees was the disaster I had seen earlier in the day, why did this sense of foreboding still oppress me? Why did it still loom if the damage had already been done? Tears of misery welling from my eyes, I tucked the covers around my ears. Later when I peeked out, I saw Daya at her station by the door, peering at me with fearful eyes.

Daya was gone when I woke next morning, and menacing shadows darkened the ceiling. Biting my lip, I got up and padded across the room. Sheets of brown mildew grew on the windows, straining the gray light of early morning into grotesque shapes. Peering through a clear spot on the pane, I found our play yard covered with green, violet, and dun moss. It grew in pads upon the play equipment and clung in puffy clusters to the fence posts.

I staggered from the window. Feliss slept curled around her pillow. I shook her, anxious for companionship. "Feliss, the moss is everywhere. *Feliss!*"

Rubbing her eyes, she got up and followed me to the window. Her shallow forehead creased as she peered out at a muffled world. "I don't like the mosses," she said petulantly. "The spores make me cough. And I don't like to stay indoors all day." Then apprehension came into her eyes. She peered around the dim room. "Our nurses—"

"They let us sleep past first devotions," I realized, startled. Normally we were on our knees beside our beds at sunrise. "Feliss, the people who came while we were in punishment last night—"

"I heard Headfather Jones," she said slowly. Her gaze flickered to Corrie's bed, where Corrie was lost in a tangle of covers. "And there were women too. Not just Nira and Miss—women from the crossroads. They were here a long time."

I clasped her forearm. "Feliss, I know something happened at the stream yesterday. I know—"

"You don't know anything!" she declared, shaking free. "And I'm not going to talk about it." Darting across the room, she flung open the play yard door. She slipped into the play yard, her nightgown dragging in the dirt. "I don't like the mosses!" she cried to the sky, her voice shrill. "I hate the mosses! *Hate them, hate them, hate them!*"

Like a mad apparition, Larissa appeared from the hallway. She scurried out the door, snatched Feliss, and pulled her back into the bunk room. Larissa's dark hair stood out from

her head, snarled and knotted, as if she had spent the night twisting and tearing at it. "We've all told you, Feliss—never, *never* open the doors when the madness is coming. Do you want all your nurses to go mad and burn you up in the fireplace?"

I stared at her, at the frightwig she had made of her hair. Over a surge of nausea, I protested, "Larissa, none of our nurses—"

Abruptly she released Feliss and dug harsh nails into my arm. "None of your nurses ever suffers the death-wish?" she demanded in a grating voice. "None of your nurses ever runs wild when the spores float in the air? But none of your nurses has ever been with child before, little master. And none of your nurses has been frightened for her life before, shut up here with the six little sunwaifs."

She snatched at Feliss again and pulled us together, her deranged gaze flaying us. "Or haven't you told little master Nadd the tricks you played on the pilgrims yesterday, little birdie girl? Haven't you told him how you drove the pilgrims out of the sacred trees and threw thunderbolts at them, leaving four dead in the meadow? Haven't you told him how clouds of birds attacked elders and little children alike? Haven't you told him how Headfather Jones's oldest daughter was blinded by slashing tree branches?"

Quickly Nira swept into the room, her thin face taut with anger. "Larissa, you were told this nonsense was not to be repeated to the children."

"Nonsense?" Larissa demanded on a rising note. She flung Feliss and me away and whirled to address Nira directly. "My own sister saw Corrie call the storm down from the skies. And her infant was one of the dead! My own nephew, my little Helmer—"

"You're hysterical," Nira said sharply. "Go to bed and stay there until you can compose yourself."

"I'm testifying to the truth! Oh yes, I remember when Feliss and Trebb were precious babies. I remember how we petted them and spoiled them. But you know yourself what perverse creatures they've all become. Corrie with her poisonous eyes; Herrol who is more an animal than a child; Nadd with his swollen head. They should all—"

"We won't speak of it!" Nira said fiercely. She seized Larissa's arm and propelled her from the room. Their argument continued in the hall in strangled whispers.

Stunned, we clustered together at the center of the room. Feliss trembled, tears spilling from her round black eyes. Herrol lowed dangerously, stamping his feet. Trebb dropped to the floor and wrapped his arms around his head. Slowly Ronna

sank down beside him, her muddy complexion mottled.

Corrie glared at us all. "I told you they wouldn't believe what the pilgrims told on us."

"Well, she'll give all her sweets to her own baby after this."

I tongued my lips. "You —you—"

"We went to the picnic grove and played peggins," Corrie said firmly. "Now I'm going to get dressed so I can have breakfast."

"If Daya will cook us some," Feliss said forlornly.

"If she won't, we'll cook it ourselves," Corrie retorted.

The porridge pot stood in the center of the table, cold. Our mugs were still sticky from the night before. Silently we served ourselves. No one initiated devotions. We were listening too intently to the insistent murmur from the nurses' quarters.

When we had eaten, we slipped from the table and went to the classroom. The rise and fall of voices was more distinct now, but no one ventured to eavesdrop. Sitting at the study table, I pinched my eyes shut, willing the day to return to normal. Let Nira appear and command us to take out our slates. Let Larissa come and wink conspiratorially as Nira drew figures on the big slate. Let Trebb jump up with a hoot and race around the room. Let Feliss—

Instead, when I opened my eyes, Feliss and Trebb, Corrie, Ronna, and Herrol peered stiffly toward the windows. Following their gaze, I caught the bright flutter of wings as birdies pecked lightly at the mildew, creating minute clear spots on the pane.

But the others were not staring at the bright wings or the mildew. They were peering beyond into a sea of faces. With a whimper, I was drawn to the window. I flattened my face against the pane. Silently a crowd had gathered in the meadow beyond our fenced yard. Men, women, and children, they were dressed in mourning garb, dark brown gowns slashed to hang in long ribbons, revealing their black undergarments. In their faces was a quality I had never seen before: an other-worldly bleakness, as if all individuality had been erased, as if man and woman, elder and youngfather had merged into one. On their gaunt cheeks were charcoaled black mourning circles. They pressed against the fence, staring up at our windows. In their hands they carried every imaginable implement: shovels, picks, hatchets, hoes.

I cringed from the window, a fresh wave of foreboding crushing the breath from me. "Nira—" I cried involuntarily. It was all I could utter over the rising tide of panic as I clutched at the windowsill, bracing myself against the roiling blackness. *Disaster.*

"I hate the mosses and the spores." Feliss's voice reached

me faintly from across the room. "Nira hasn't even hung the storm curtains today."

Trebb sprang from his chair, limbs flying. "I'll get the sprinkler can and the curtains. We can hang them ourselves."

"Then we won't have to look at their faces," Feliss echoed in relief. "Then Larissa won't go mad today. And Miss and Daya."

"Larissa is already mad," Corrie hissed, her lips still drawn in that chillingly tender smile. "So is everyone else, Feliss. My Mother and my Father like the taste of madness. Today the people will cry and bleed in the meadow so my Father can suck their blood into the sky to create a special storm. Because my Mother is thirsty for the taste of blood and tears raining down on her grassy pelt. My Mother—"

With a whimper I fled her encompassing smile. In the hallway I barreled into Nira as she hurried from the nurses' quarters.

"Nira, the people from the Crossroads—"

"I've seen the people. Ugly things are happening in the world today. And the people of the Crossroads—"

"The people believe Corrie and Feliss made them happen," I blurted.

"And Trebb," she added distractedly, sweeping me down the hall before her. "But the danger is to all of you. If you won't go quietly to your beds, I must lock you in the closet again until the madness is past."

But as we stepped into the classroom to fetch the others, a dirge-like chant rose from the meadow beyond our fence. Beginning softly, it quickly swelled, shuddering through the chinked timbers to thunder in the classroom. Nira halted, her features blanching. Seizing at her skirts, she ran to the window.

I followed, pressing my face to the glass again. In the meadow women and children had thrown themselves face down in the grass, their arms extended, palms upward in supplication. Elders and youngfathers joined arms over their groveling bodies and swayed with the rhythm of the chant, implements and mourning banners bristling above them.

"The litany of the damned," Nira said in a low voice. She turned to stare down at me.

"But is it—is it for *us?* Are they damning us?"

Slowly she shook her head. "It's their own damnation they are celebrating, the damnation of a people routed from their sacred place and driven in disgrace under the mocking sky. They are acknowledging their ultimate unworthiness. And when they have completed the final stanza—"

I caught my breath, waiting for her to continue. Instead she suddenly seemed to come to life again.

"Come, children," Nira said briskly, catching my hand and Feliss's. At a half run, she hurried us to the bunkroom and to our beds and tucked the covers around us. As she bent over me, the sonorous chant of damnation rattled the panes of the windows and shuddered the walls.

"Stuff your fingers into your ears, Nadd."

"They—will they—"

She shook her head, looking at me with pity. "They won't harm you. The danger now—"

"The danger?" I whispered, my body shuddering with a new onslaught of foreboding. "The danger?"

But she did not reply.

*Danger.* But I knew some force darker than danger moved in the meadow today. Danger implied hope of escape, of deliverance. And there *was* no hope.

*Doom and damnation. Terror unfathomable; pain unendurable. Eternal death.* I was gripped by a searingly clear vision of disaster, an ecstasy of horror. Then the intensity of my vision became too great. My body arched and, convulsing, I lost consciousness.

It was night when I swam reluctantly back to awareness. My bed had been pulled into the classroom. Nira sat beside me in a straight-backed chair, her hair disarranged. But a strange serenity marked her face. I blinked my eyes and tested my limbs. Like a fever, the terrible sense of impending doom had broken and passed, leaving me weak. "The people—" I said stiffly, thick-tongued.

The same uncanny serenity that marked Nira's features distinguished her voice. "Today will always be remembered," she said, the words soft and almost sweet. "Two madnesses met in the meadow, one lingering from the streamside yesterday, the other swirling from the mosses that grew everywhere this dawn. Many, many were lost who had survived previous sieges of spore-fever."

"They—they killed each other," I said. "When they finished chanting—"

She nodded. "Yes, when they completed the final stanza of the litany of the damned, they turned on each other and hacked and beat each other to death. I watched it all from the windows. Men and women tore off their mourning gowns, copulated, and then battered each other to death. Left unguarded, the cattle broke from their enclosures and joined the melee. They trampled and gored all those who could not flee—or would not. Children and elders slaughtered each other and bled in the grass."

Dimly visions of carnage moved in the still room, deep-eyed, bloody. "But they didn't attack the cottage," I quavered, trying to grasp the convoluted dimensions this new madness

had taken. "They gathered outside our fence with axes and hoes but they—"

"At first they intended to destroy Sunwaif Cottage. Headfather Jones sent a runner to warn me of the danger. Perhaps if it hadn't been for the spores stimulated by yesterday's rain we'd all be dead. But the rain-spores incite not murderous fury but suicidal rage. Every child knows that. And gathered as they were, all in a body, joined by the lingering madness of the previous day, they must have felt they had indeed become one person. And so to strangle your neighbor, to hack at your mate was little different from assaulting yourself." Her forehead was faintly scored with a frown. "Does it disturb you to discuss all this, Nadd?"

"I—no. No," I realized. I'd carried the burden of disaster alone too long. Speaking of it diluted its corrosive force. "Is everyone, are all the people—"

"Dead?" For the first time she sighed. "Fortunately not all the people of Drae's Crossroads joined the mob. But Headfather Jones fell shortly after noon, trying to restore sanity. He's laid out in the pantry. And there are many dead in the meadow, oh so many. But there were survivors too. And when the first blood-fury passed, they took up torches and marched to the streamside. Later we saw the trees burning, burning for kilometers up and down the stream. I watched until dark, hoping to see the survivors return to Drae's Crossroads, but I saw no one. They may have died in the flames. And all the people who were afraid of the sunwaifs are dead in the meadow. When help comes from the other communities, I'll point out that memories of the terrible slaughter will always cling to this place. Your tender minds can only be salvaged if you're removed to a normal existence."

*Normal*. The word echoed hollowly in my mind. Move the six of us into a longcottage with a dozen pious pilgrims? Delegate Corrie, Feliss, and Ronna to the kitchen? Send Herrol and Trebb to the fields each afternoon with hoes in hand? Once I had believed that, if permitted to live normally, we could learn to feel normal, to behave normally. Now I saw only futility in the attempt.

"We've been given a sign already," she said dreamily, staring beyond me at some pastel vision of normality. "When Headfather Jones's body was brought in, it was battered and torn and we didn't even have time to wash it. But Ronna slipped from her bed in the confusion and sat with it, sat with it for hours before we discovered where she had gone. And while she sat, a miracle occurred. All marks of violence were cleansed from his body."

A sign? If only I could believe the miraculous restoration of Headfather Jones's body was the work of the Secret Power. Ronna's strange power, I knew with a sinking heart, was grounded in the same base as Corrie's fierce destructiveness, as Feliss's impish mischief, as my own tormenting gift of vision. And the basis for none of these could be human. We were other, deeply, inexplicably, inalienably *other*.

*CORRIE*
**DESTINY YEAR**
**0217-0222**

We learned that the survivors of the Day of Damnation had deserted Drae's Crossroads and scattered throughout the other settlements. Larissa, Daya, and Miss disappeared with them, leaving us alone with Nira.

The next few years flash through my memory in a series of images: Herrol leading a massive bull through the meadow by the nose, Nira's baby Angelicus laughing on its back, her yellow curls a halo; Feliss and Trebb returning from the picnic grove with buckets of purple dewberries; flocks of crybirds and palemoths converging on our cottage after each rain, filling the air with color; the placid lowing of the cattle; Miss appearing one winter evening, her arms black with skinspot; all of us gathered around the housefire on cold evenings; Miss dancing through the cottage next spring, her arms smooth and white.

Peace and prosperity. Our cattle ate poisonous grasses and fattened. Herrol brought us porkers which wallowed contentedly through the worst spore storms. Our nurses bloomed. The baby Angelicus delighted everyone.

We were eight years old, we were nine, we were ten. Gradually we realized that beyond our own meadows an ominous change had come across the land: drought. Slowly Drae's Crossroads was resettled, but not by proper youngfathers and mothers, not by staid elders and pious children. Instead the outcasts of the other settlements gravitated to the deserted cottages and barns: people displaced by dissent, by unacceptable word and deed or by the increasingly savage specters of famine and disease. But despite their outcast status, they selected a Headfather, and one spring morning he appeared at our gate, his coarse red hair slicked to his skull, his bony face pulled tight in a rictal smile. His eyes were rust-red and watchful.

Nira framed herself in the classroom door at his approach, her body rigid, her features wary. "Good morning, Father," she greeted him noncommitally as he came up the path.

"Good morning, Maid McCree. I come to offer chant with you," replied he, in a voice pitched persuasively low.

Nira's features grew very still. "It has been many years since we were blessed with spiritual guidance, Father. Apparently we have been forgotten, if not by the Secret Power—who has blessed us all—then by His human agents." A subtle intonation questioned his status as agent of the Power.

Headfather Schuster bared a range of incongruously square white teeth in a placating smile. "It is unfortunate that the irrational fear which emptied the buildings and fields we now occupy also served to isolate you here. Over the past few months, we have watched your sunwaifs playing in the meadows and in the picnic grove. And we have concluded among ourselves that they are not witches but simply children, growing children." He peered around with alert interest, his red-brown eyes finally minutely examining the four of us who sat at our study tables. His ruddy brows arched questioningly. "There are two other children, aren't there? As well as the younger child?"

"Ronna and Herrol are tending the stock this morning." Instinctively Nira had moved to station herself at the blackboard, rod in hand. "They have little aptitude for academics."

"As well, as well," he assured her absently. Then he turned to us. "Shall we offer gratitude to the Secret Power for the good estate in which I find you, children? Not only are you fatter than any child I've left behind in Drae's Crossroads, you are blessed with a snug home and conscientious care."

My teeth ground as he flicked a glance at Nira, covertly evaluating her response to his flattery.

"I won't prostrate myself," I declared, jumping up from my table.

"No one has to lie on the floor," Headfather Schuster said. He turned a placating smile upon Nira, whose face had tightened into a disapproving mask. "Why insist upon the oppression of our female members when the Secret Power waits to hear all of us? The new women of Drae's Crossroads stand with their men, Maid McCree."

Nira's eyes narrowed to chill gray slits. "The new women?" she demanded, the words emerging as spears of ice. "Does the Secret Power suddenly fail to differentiate between the proper humility of women and the pride of men?"

Headfather Schuster's smile tightened. "I'm certain you've heard that in Drae's Crossroads we dissent from any doctrine that requires certain members of our community to publicly humiliate themselves."

Nira said sharply, "I've heard

that a few misfits have been driven away from the pilgrim settlements and that they have united to form a band of malcontents and have settled in Drae's Crossroads."

"And you yourself are content? The children you're charged with have been isolated and even persecuted. You've been ostracized for years now, made rightfully wary of approaching any settlement except under heavy veiling, to secretly visit some member of your family. Even your family, I'm told, considers you an outcast. Yet you're content with the established pilgrim order of life and worship on Destiny?"

"I'm the victim of faulty understanding," she retorted.

Headfather Schuster's lips retracted, revealing square white teeth again. "We are one people, man and woman, elder and child. Hurt and humiliation must not be inflicted upon any of us. We're only mortals after all; we have no right to judge or to punish. And so I've come hoping to partially heal the breach that has existed these past few years. Will you chant with me, Maid McCree? Will you permit your charges to enter into praise with me?"

Nira's features remained taut. "Headfather, how can I permit the children to partake of the heresy that has taken root in what was once a pilgrim community?"

"But you can permit them to continue to exist as outcasts?" he demanded. "You can permit them to grow up here as witches, clawing at the outer perimeters of human society? They've been fortunate in your care, but you can't provide everything forever. One day they'll require membership in a spiritual community. They'll require guidance and leadership and aid, both material and spiritual. You're just one woman, assisted by another. You're not immortal."

Reluctantly Nira nodded. "That —is true."

"The Secret Power is mercy," Headfather Schuster intoned, his voice dropping a register. "The Secret Power is life. The Secret Power is all things right and good and true. All life and being flow from the Secret Power and at the Secret Power's command. We come to the Power today . . ."

Involuntarily Nira's lips moved, joining him in the chant. Soon Trebb's voice took up the chorus, with Feliss wavering behind. Finally Nadd joined in, his gnome's head stiffly erect on his thin neck, his eyes stark and staring. I subsided into my chair, refusing to be drawn into the hypnotic murmur. Instead of reverence, I felt resentment, intense resentment. Our isolation was the only lasting memorial to my brief hour of ascendancy, when my Mother and my Father

had answered my call and stormed across the meadow. I had never since been able to call back the storm, no matter how darkly I tried. Now this gaunt man had come to dazzle Nira with his sophistries and re-establish ties between Sunwaif Cottage and Drae's Crossroads.

He had come to destroy my fragile creation: lasting fear, continued isolation. I scowled at him as he led the chant. His face was bony and starved, a death's head. His eyelids were so thin that tiny blue veins showed through and his knobby hands were ugly with nervous pulses. And his eyes—they slid open and peered at me, calculating, keenly assessing . . . hungry.

When the chant was done, Nira raised her head as if in a daze. Her eyes were heavy with tears. "Headfather Schuster, it's been so long, so very long. If we can repay you in any way, if there's any need in your parish—"

He responded almost too quickly. "I understand your milk cows are very productive this year."

Her face brightened. "Oh yes. Yes, Herrol milked them early this morning. If you would do us the honor of sampling the take—"

In the pantry Nira dipped the creamy milk from the pail. Headfather Schuster's hand shook as he accepted the filled mug. Raising it to his pale lips, he closed his eyes tight and quaffed down the milk. When he opened his eyes again, they were unfocused, as if his attention were turned inward, to the cool wash of milk down his gullet. "Ah yes," he said softly. "Yes, yes. It's excellent."

"And your own cattle?" Nira probed, quickly dipping him a second mug.

"Our cattle?" His voice broke bitterly. Closing his eyes, he tossed down the second mug of milk and grasped at composure. "Our cattle are lean this year, Maid McCree. As I'm sure you know, the two-year shortage of rain has seriously impeded crops everywhere. All the settlements are suffering, some quite heavily. Yet I hear that the cattle in your pasture don't even require supplemental grain or Earthgrasses to fatten and bear. I hear they live entirely from native croppage."

Quickly Nira hooded her eyes. "They—they graze upon webgrass, yes. I haven't been trained in animal husbandry, and so I have no explanation for their ability. I—"

"That's not your province, Maid McCree," Headfather Schuster agreed quickly, his rust-red eyes coming sharply back to focus. "An adaptation, I'm sure; perhaps even to be expected after the breed has lived so many years on Destiny." But his eyes were sharply assessing as he gazed around the pantry.

"Perhaps since you are so well supplied, my people can deal with you for your surplus production. We don't have much—"

"We'll be pleased to give freely," Nira said quickly. "We have everything we require except perhaps a few bolts of roughspun and some muslin."

His gaze quickly withdrew to cover of his brows. He rendered quick mental calculations. "I'll set spinners to work today."

But did he *have* spinners, I found myself wondering. And did his spinners have fibers—and the strength to work them? Certainly he had hesitated before making the commitment. I studied his gaunt face as he and Nira concluded the interview. Starvation was etched clearly upon his skeletal features.

And gradually a smile of comprehension drew my lips. I didn't need Nadd's vision to see that Headfather Schuster had come to us not out of concern but out of hunger. We had meat and milk, while the drought-stricken people of Drae's Crossroads starved. Despite his sonorous voice, despite his smooth words, Headfather Schuster had come groveling to Sunwaif Cottage. And in his cautious approach, in his hungry alertness, lay proof that the Day of Damnation had not been forgotten. Why else approach six children and two maids with such elaborate tact? No one knew that I had no more power now than any other ten-year-old. With a flick of my head I caught Headfather Schuster's eyes and created a glittering smile for him. Involuntarily he retreated a step, a muscle twitching in his temple.

I glanced back at Nadd, victory flashing in my eyes. But Nadd scarcely noticed. His spine pressed rigidly against the pantry wall, he stared at Nira and Headfather Schuster. His face was pasty, his eyes huge, in them an amalgam of dread and anticipation. Whatever he saw for the days, weeks, and months ahead, it chilled him. And whatever sent Nadd into silent spasms of dread would surely delight me. With a sharp laugh, I threw myself at Headfather Schuster. The crackling of brittle birdie bones seemed to echo in the tiny pantry as I wrapped my arms around him in an impulsive hug. Then, before he could respond, I skipped away, running to the play yard door.

Elation rampaged in my heart as I ran through the meadow. Our isolation was at an end, but suddenly I had the sense not of a precious creation shattered but of opportunity being given to create again, to create on a larger scale, to create freely and exultantly. Father Sun smiled down at me.

*CORRIE*
**SPRING 0224**

Despite my Father's tantaliz-

ing smile the afternoon Headfather Schuster first appeared at Sunwaif Cottage, our admission to Drae's Crossroads society brought the village not to its knees but to its feet. Each morning Feliss whirled down the dirt lane on her way to the village school in a vortex of crybirds and palemoths, striking magic into every famine-shadowed eye. At recess Trebb galloped away across dead fields and ran back through live meadows. Ronna hovered over sickly toddlers, and their pinched faces flushed with health. After school Herrol tramped the back lanes of the settlement, and dying cattle turned fiery-eyed and splintered their crude wooden pens to follow him. Only my expectations and Nadd's were frustrated.

My expectations—they were so vague. Had I expected lightning to leap from my fingertips and ignite the entire village? Or had I simply envisioned superstitious villagers groveling at my feet? Whichever, instead of being intimidated, our new classmates perversely blossomed with health. Within the first week runny noses and shadowed eyes disappeared from the classroom. Soon skinspot became nonexistent.

In short, we had straggled into a hellhole of starved heretics only to see them swiftly transformed. All around us meadows greened and cattle grew sleek. Ground left fallow over the long drought sprouted with volunteer grain. Yet despite the frequent drizzle which accompanied our arrival, spore madness never touched the village. Flocks of crybirds devoured the fresh mosses before they could bloom and spew madness. And wherever Feliss, Trebb, Ronna, Herrol, and Nadd went, the villagers watched—not in dread, but with awe.

Alone—I was totally alone. Feliss had her crybirds and moths, Trebb his grasses. Herrol surrounded himself with beasts, Ronna with toddlers. Even Nadd had his fearful visions to cling to. But I had no one and nothing. Each morning my Father studied me with distant contempt. As I walked down the dirt lane, my Mother lay like a dead animal under my feet, her rock and soil inert, unresponding. I was bereft.

Weak and bereft and tearful. With a sob, I abruptly turned and darted away across the schoolyard to the neglected meadow beyond. *My twin, my twin, where are you now? Have you rotted to nothing in some bleak burying yard, time-robbed even of your tiny white bones? Is that why my dreams are empty now, utterly empty—because dissolution has rendered you nothing, nothing at all?* I pounded through brush and web-grass, watering them with my tears. Then, a distance from the village, I saw a lone

bluewillow. It was massive, its limbs burdened with foliage, its gnarled branches hunched to form a circular cavern. With a loud sob, I slipped through the arching branches into fetid darkness. I threw myself down and wailed, kicking the ground. My tears streamed down my face, too copious to be absorbed by the soil.

Finally I lay exhausted, but tears continued to drain from my eyes, as if from a flooded reservoir. Bitterly I let them flow. Then finally from beyond the tree came a shrilly rising twitter. It increased swiftly in volume and the limbs of the tree quivered. Frowning, I sat up. "Feliss?" My voice was hoarse with grief.

"Corrie? Are you there? It's time to go back to the cottage, and we can't leave without you."

Tears continued to stream from my eyes, an unquenchable flood. "I'm not coming."

"But you can't stay here," Feliss pleaded. Briefly her face materialized between the branches again, the nose wrinkled distastefully. "You can't sleep outside all night. Besides, it smells bad under here. It smells like things are rotting."

"Things *are* rotting," I said flatly. "And I'm going to sleep here." Angrily I crawled around the tree to put the trunk between us.

Her flock continued to shift uneasily through the treetop, twittering unhappily, occasionally joining their voices in a shriek of anguish. Faintly I heard Feliss sobbing from beyond my cavern of foliage. Rising anger dried my own tears. None of them wanted me. So why couldn't they leave me in solitude? Finally, my mood hopelessly shattered, I crawled from my cavern and ran around the tree. Feliss knelt in the grass weeping, her face in her hands.

"All right, I'll go back with you," I conceded angrily.

"You will?" she asked, peeping between her fingers, her voice rising eagerly.

"I said so, didn't I?"

When we had walked together for several minutes, she wrinkled her nose and stared distastefully at my muddy clothes. "I still smell something, something almost like—"

"Like what?"

Briefly her gaze met mine. A shadow touched her face, dampening the sparkle in her eyes. But she only shook her head, then wriggled free and disappeared across the field, her birds spiraling around her.

It was not until the next morning, when I bundled my muddy clothes for the laundry, that I detected the aroma: faint, tantalizing, at once spicy and musty. Startled, I shoved my face into the muddy bundle and sucked a deep breath. Momentarily a heady sense of exaltation gripped me. I drew another deep breath

and my arms and legs grew swiftly, dizzily, until I could stand with my feet on my Mother's back and cup my palms under my Father's fiery chin. His whiskers were bristles of light, tickling my palms. I arched to my toes, making myself a conduit, and the power that was in them both flowed restlessly through my elongated arms and legs. Gradually portions of it were diverted and accumulated in a central recess deep in my chest. There it was amplified into storm, storm that walked across the meadow on flickering white feet.

But the scent of vision dust was so faint, so elusive, that the storm walked no more than moments. Then my arms and legs shriveled to their normal dimensions, and I stood alone in the dingy laundry room, powerless.

Powerless—*for how long?* Now fresh hope gripped me. The scent on my clothes could only have come from beneath the massive bluewillow. Somehow, despite the drought, those dense branches had hoarded enough moisture to prompt stray vision spores to life. Now I visualized my solitary tree festooned and garlanded with long gray beards. I had only to plunge beneath the tree and inhale that heady mustiness, suck it deep into my lungs, and I would become fully my Mother's daughter again, my Father's son.

But when I ran past the schoolhouse and through the overgrown meadow, I found the tree's branches bare of everything but foliage. I couldn't see even the wispiest beard of moss. Disbelieving, I crawled into the fetid cavern and peered up. Morning sunlight probed through the dense foliage, creating a half-light—a half-light that revealed nothing at all.

*Crybirds.* Blood hammered in my head. Feliss's birds had surged noisily through the tree yesterday afternoon. Had they stripped the branches of their fledgling moss? And if so, when would it reappear? In weeks? Months? Years?

Tears of frustration burned in my eyes. I sank to my knees and crawled around, drawing at the dank air. The vision dust was here, but in such minute quantities that I could not breathe deeply enough, rapidly enough to build a concentration in my lungs. I moaned angrily as tears of frustration surged through my clenched eyelids and ran down my face again. I threw myself down, rolling myself into a ball to contain the floodtide. But it flowed freely without my consent, wetting my face, my coverall, the soil itself.

Much later, when my tears were almost exhausted, I heard rain. Wiping my face, I crawled from my cavern. Overhead dark clouds loomed in steep vertical banks around my tree. Rain fell in a pounding torrent to a radius

of a hundred meters. But beyond that clearly defined area the sky was cloudless, the grasses dry.

Squatting, I sucked greedily at the damp air. It tingled in my air passages. Faintly at first, then more clearly, visions began to appear. I saw Destiny as it was in the beginning, when my Father was a weak pinpoint in the perpetual night sky and my Mother lay frozen in the deeps of space, swept by cold winds. But her beauty was apparent even then, with her hide rocky and bare, her brow wreathed in ragged mountains, her blood vessels jagged gorges through which flowed not water but lava. Despite the sulphurous vapors which vented from her rocky crust, tenuously veiling her dark face, my Father reached out eager arms of gravity for her and drew her toward him. As she was tugged into his orbit, he grew bolder and brighter in her sky, until finally his scarlet face hung huge and blazing upon her horizon at sunrise.

Slowly, lovingly, he coaxed life from dead rock. Simple mosses and fungi appeared and blossomed, cloaking my Mother's rocky crust in violet, dun, and green. Gratefully my Mother turned her brilliantly mottled face to my Father and smiled up at him. But as he crossed the sky on that first long day of life, his warming gaze baked the tenuous life from the tender fungi and mosses. They were too fragile, his rays too intense. By sunset my Mother lay barren again, and my Father mourned.

Through that long night my Father pondered. Near morning he realized moisture was required to protect and preserve the delicate fabric of life. Accordingly he hung over the still oceans, staring down at them with great intensity. Concentrating his heat, he sucked the moisture from them, curled it high into the air, and swept it across the sky. He created massive clouds, towering thunderheads, which he shepherded across the sky as he again approached my Mother's rocky shores.

Below, my Mother caught the welcome moisture upon her back and rejoiced. And upon the third day of life she greeted my Father not only with brilliant fungi and mosses but with web-grass, which spawned just beneath her heart in dense green clumps and spread quickly across her entire hide. Soon she was entirely covered in a shimmering green coat.

As the web-grasses broke down the rocky crust of my Mother's outer shell, proliferation occurred rapidly. Eagerly my Mother created bright-bushes to reflect my Father's glory. Other brush joined them and soon the first trees burst from the soil, uniting air and soil.

But the system was not yet perfectly balanced. The web-grasses fought the intrusion of brush and trees with wiry filaments. With every rain mosses and fungi grew in dense blankets, smothering the foliage of the trees and brush. And so together my Mother and my Father brought forth slugworms to chew through the wiry web-roots to permit the brush and trees fair foothold. Then they jointly created the crybirds, fashioned from a rainbow, to clear back the mosses and fungi after each rain, and the palemoths, to strain surplus spores from the air.

The life history of Destiny passed before my eyes in a dazzling panorama, from inception to the present. Although life appeared to proliferate without plan, in actuality my Mother and my Father had created an intricately balanced system. Everything had its place and its function: the mosses and fungi; the grasses, bushes, and trees; the worms, crybirds, and moths. Together they comprised a delicately balanced whole.

But a little over two centuries ago a foreign element had intruded into the ancient balance. Suddenly web-grass was chopped and ripped back—not to make room for fingerpalms and bluewillows, but to permit the introduction of alien seed. Oats, barley, wheat, corn, cabbages, potatoes, carrots—angrily my Mother tried to strangle them with fingers of web-grass. Persistently they recurred, unwelcome parasites sucking up precious moisture, leaching away vital minerals, pushing back native vegetation.

And the beasts—from the first day the heavy tread of the cattle and porkers was agony to my Mother. Soil that had never known a footstep heavier than that of a weightless crybird was suddenly assaulted daily, callously, by tons of flesh. Angered, my Father glowered down upon the ungainly aliens. They ignored his outrage. In desperation my Mother pleaded for surplus rain, from which she created clouds of maddening spores. There seemed to lie the creatures' greatest vulnerability. Yet when the spore clouds faded, prematurely dispatched by my parents' own heedless palemoths and crybirds, the ugly beasts survived.

And the cattle and porkers were not alone. They were tended by unlikely creatures who swathed their frail bodies against rain and wind and worshipped an alien entity, a power they claimed had guided them to Destiny from beyond the stars. They built altars to him and raised their voices to him, attributing to him my Mother's every earthen mercy, my Father's every glowing virtue. Stung, my Mother and my Father sent storm to punish the intruders. But the creatures scuttled to safety and

perversely praised their own Secret Power for their salvation.

He was a false god, an interloper. His proper realm lay light-years away on another world. Yet he proved as tenacious as the settlers themselves. When my Father spat long streamers of radiation at him, instead of shriveling and dying, he perverted the attack to blessing. Through a nimble chemical conjugation, he caused his people to be at once irradiated and impregnated by my Father, and nine months later was born a set of sub-deities, endowed by the circumstances of their nativity with uncanny powers.

My Mother writhed in frenzy; my Father stormed in rage. Through the devious agency of this intruding deity, they had unwittingly become parents of six creatures who commanded elements of the natural world, yet who were also the fleshly products of the intruders.

I crouched beneath the bluewillow, dark images swirling in my mind. Feliss, Trebb, Ronna, Herrol, Nadd, myself: we were at once flesh of my Mother and my Father and of the human intruders. We were a melding of the powers and weaknesses of both. And now our Destiny-parents looked upon us with as much consternation as our flesh-parents. We were their god-sons and god-daughters, at once beloved and alien, cherished and feared.

The six of us constituted a balance, just as balance had long existed between my Mother and my Father. Each of us commanded some power which contributed to our own delicately balanced system. But was it a system that would eventually restore the ancient balance of Destiny or destroy it utterly? Which parents would we serve?

Who would benefit from our birth and who would suffer? Whom would we serve and whom destroy? Would Herrol's cattle and porkers pierce ever-widening paths across my Mother's hide, inflicting permanent agony? Would Trebb's growing powers extend the influence of the imported vegetation, to the detriment of the web-grasses and native brush? Would Feliss countermand every spore-storm by sweeping her foolish birds and moths through the madness-laden air? Would Ronna perpetually rescue sick children and frail elders? And Nadd—he was no threat now. At twelve he was a hysterical child, a pathetic figure. But one day his visions could come clear. One day the settlers might listen to his shrill warnings.

Whom *could* we serve but the intruders? It was their deity, after all, who had engineered our birth.

Unwillingly I began to cry again. Long, racking sobs gripped me as I was torn by my Mother's own quandary. We

were her god-children and she looked upon us with helpless adoration, knowing that if we survived—if we fulfilled our destinies—we could ultimately destroy her.

*Destroy her.* I sobbed for a long time beneath the tree, helplessly, hopelessly. Then I emerged, my heart shriveled to a leathery pod, and stared bleakly across the meadow. To a distance of many meters the soil was saturated with rain. Upon the horizon my Father's face hung in setting sadness. But before I could reach for him, before I could declare my loyalty, I saw the grasses begin to sway in a rhythmic pattern. I peered across the field. A running form approached my tree.

*Trebb*—his name was a cry in my heart, a cry that hurt: *Trebb, my god-brother, sovereign of the grasses, lord of the trees, ruler of all the leafy green kingdom.* Frozen, I watched him approach. He ran loosely through the dense webgrass, a heedless smile on his mobile features. The long blades tangled around his ankles, worshipping him, and my solitary tree bowed to him with a rattle of foliage. Panting to a halt, he flashed me an engaging grin. "Hey, Corrie, you should see the new rice paddie we put in week before last. The sprouts are ankle high, and there hasn't even been a heavy rain yet."

"But you've gone out there every afternoon with Nira and Headfather Schuster," I said dully. He regularly visited all the settlement fields, urging alien vegetation to life, drawing it up from the soil, healthy and vigorous.

"We always go out there," he acknowledged. "You know that." He glanced around, then flashed a second meaningless grin. "Hey, it's time for us to go back to the cottage. Nira says if you won't come with me—"

"I'll come," I said faintly, staring at him with sudden desperate longing. "I'll come with you, Trebb." I would go with him anywhere today, seeing him as I did with freshly opened eyes, knowing what I did: that he too was cherished son to my Mother and Father.

He laughed, not noticing the tears that slid down my face again. "Race you then!" Turning, he darted back across the grass, sweeping it alive in great green swaths. With an involuntary sob I launched myself after him, running against the evening breeze, running against pain, running against loss.

Because deep in my heart I feared I recognized my parents' will. I was the huntress. I was the one who had been entrusted with the responsibility of destroying. That was my function within the balance of our six lives. And instinctively, unwillingly, I suspected I knew whom I must ultimately destroy.

Not the pilgrims. They would

eventually destroy themselves.

Not the heretics. They were so few they hardly mattered.

Not my parents, my earthen Mother, my fiery Father.

Instead . . .

"Trebb, wait!" I cried desperately. "Wait for me." I ran after him, knowing that if I were left alone in the meadow the terrible possibility that had been revealed to me that day would desolate me, would destroy me as utterly as I feared I must ultimately destroy.

*CORRIE*
**SPRING 0226**

I had squatted behind the brightbushes at the fork of the road for over an hour when Angelicus and her friend raced past and darted up the hill toward the burying ground. Stiffly I stood and emerged from my hiding place. My mood today was strained, tinged with foreboding, almost as if I were having a taste of Nadd's uncomfortable gift. Yet the early morning sky was lacy with golden cirrus, and dew turned the meadow to a garden of jewels. Stooping, I caught a sheaf of web-grass between my palms and drew my cupped hands up, harvesting a small ration of dew. I licked it off my palms thirstily, weary of waiting for the others, weary of trying to ignore the ominous tingling at the very perimeter of my consciousness. If Feliss had insisted on picnicking in the dell beyond the east meadow instead of in the play yard at Sunwaif Cottage, if they had left the road and cut through the wheat fields, they would not even pass this way.

A few moments later I heard the first distant call of Feliss's crybirds. It rapidly became a shrill din as the flock swept down the road. Feliss was barely visible through the flurry of bright wings. I glimpsed her face, laughing, provocative. Nadd trotted after the flock lugging a picnic hamper, his face pinched with anxiety. Herrol and Trebb followed, supporting Ronna's invalid chair between them. Ronna lay lax against its fabric panels, her heavy-lidded eyes dull, her skeletal features lifeless.

I didn't emerge from the bright-bushes until they had passed. Then I trudged down the path after them, keeping my distance. I lay every night with my face pressed to the soil, listening to my Mother groan in her sleep, torn by the dark conflict of her dreams. I woke regularly with tears on my face. Did Ronna's deathlike weakness mean that my Mother was preparing even now to turn me against the others? Did I have any will in the matter? Frowning, at once reluctant to join the others and powerless to resist, I set off down the road.

By the time I reached the cot-

tage, Feliss had perched upon the top rung of the climbing frame, hidden in a spiraling cone of crybirds. Occasionally a single bird peeled from formation and darted at Nadd, who crouched at the base of the frame. When I approached the gate, Feliss's face appeared, her black eyes sparkling maliciously at me. "I don't care who told you I was going to dance with feathers, Herrol. I'm not. Why don't you ask Corrie to dance instead?"

Herrol stood bare-chested in the overgrown play yard path, his feet planted wide. His dark eyes were belligerent. "Corrie doesn't dance. And if you won't dance like you promised—"

"I didn't promise anything," Feliss jeered, her birds taking up the chorus.

"She's teasing you, Herrol," Trebb interjected uneasily. Ronna sat on the bunkroom steps, leaning weakly against the door, and Trebb stood guard over her, his hands jiggling nervously at his sides. They all seemed on edge, as if this day represented a pivotal point in our lives and each of us sensed it. "As long as she can make you bellow, she'll never dance. You know how she is. She's a tease."

Herrol's narrow forehead compressed so fiercely his eyebrows disappeared into his hair. "I know," he rumbled. "And if she doesn't dance—"

"I never said I would," Feliss jeered again. At her signal, the spiraling cone of crybirds swept back to form a surging curtain behind her. As sunlight struck her bare arms, it seemed to plume them with color. I frowned uneasily, remembering the golden bird I had seen twice this spring soaring far in the distance, larger than any crybird. Disturbed, I rejected the image. Feliss wore close-fitting blue trousers edged with scarlet ruffles. Her yellow bodice molded her small bosom provocatively. Her fine black hair was feathered to frame her gamin face.

Herrol swiped at the birds with a bellow of fury. They responded by darting directly at his face, sweeping aside at the last moment. His muscular jowls set with rage. Reaching out, he snatched a pair of birds from the air. "If you won't dance—" he raged over the alarmed scream of the captured birds.

Quickly the entire flock took up the cry, darting back to Feliss with an indignant clamor. A cry as piercing as the birds' sprang from her throat and she handed herself down the frame and threw herself at Herrol. "Let my birds go!"

"Not until you dance!" Now there was as much challenge as fury in his bellow. He thrust out his muscular chest, dark ruff of hair gleaming.

Feliss flung herself at him, screeching with rage. They disappeared in a cloud of feathers,

Feliss's indignant voice, Herrol's enraged one drowned by the fury of the birds. Alarmed, Nadd scrambled up from the grass and threw himself into the melee. As he pawed his way into the feathered cloud, crybirds launched themselves at him, driving their shallow bills into his bare arms and unprotected face. He fell back, shielding his eyes with one forearm, blood oozing from a dozen punctures.

Instinctively Ronna started up from the steps. Trebb pushed her back. "I'll take care of him." Quickly he dampened a napkin from the water skin and ran across the yard to where Nadd huddled by the fence.

But Nadd resisted Trebb's ministrations. "Don't let them —don't—"

"They won't hurt each other," Trebb declared, but his face was strained and he glanced back at the surging cloud anxiously. "They're just playing. They—"

"They're not playing, Trebb," Nadd insisted, his narrow face contorted. "Listen to them! It's not—"

"Nadd—"

"Listen!" Nadd cried, pushing aside the damp napkin.

Frustrated, Trebb crumpled the napkin, a frown tightening his mobile lips. I crept into the play yard and the three of us peered into the feathered cloud. As if forced aside by our combined wills, the screen of crybirds parted to reveal Feliss and Herrol wrestling in the grass. He had torn her yellow bodice half away, revealing one small pink breast, and he tugged at her trousers, his nostrils dilated, his eyes glittering. Feliss fought him with shrill laughter, resisting just enough to inflame him.

Nadd clutched Trebb's arm apprehensively. "Trebb, Nira told me—"

But Trebb had already interpreted the situation. He shook loose from Nadd and launched himself at Herrol, limbs thrashing. "Herrol, if Nira hears that you—"

Herrol hardly seemed to notice Trebb's attempt at intervention. With a bellow he lashed backward, toppling Trebb. Before Trebb could regain his feet, Herrol seized Feliss's bodice and ripped it completely away. Delighted, Feliss jumped up from the grass with a shrieking laugh. She lunged and fought him for the ruined garment. Snorting, Herrol caught the waistband of her trousers and wrenched.

"Feliss, your birds!" Nadd shrilled. "Your birds can make him stop!"

Feliss laughed, a mocking trill. Then, breaking free from Herrol, she covered her breasts with one hand and with the other signaled to her birds. Her eyes sparkled with malicious delight. For instead of diving at Herrol, the birds spiraled outward and darted at Nadd. He retreated

with a frightened cry. "Feliss!"

She laughed as the birds drove him to a corner of the play yard and barricaded him against the weathered fence. When Trebb immediately jumped to his feet and tried to grapple with Herrol again, Feliss swept her hand through the air and a second phalanx of crybirds formed, cutting Trebb off from Herrol. Trebb threw a protective hand over his face and it was immediately pocked with scarlet. Jeering, the birds drove him across the yard and against the fence.

I rose to the balls of my feet, an angry cry in my throat. But when I ran across the yard to Trebb, the birds surged between us, mocking me in a hundred voices. *"Feliss!"* My voice was raw. When had she grown from vexing flirt to willful minx, intent upon inflaming Herrol despite the cost to us all?

As if she had read my question, Feliss crowed with delight. "No one wants to watch you dance, Corrie. You could tear off all your clothes right now and no one would even look. But they look at me! Everyone looks at me, even when I'm wrapped in my birds. And everyone loves me, no matter what I do. I get everything I want! All I have to do is take it! *Everything!*"

"Then you'd better be careful what you want!" I shrieked in warning.

But she didn't hear me. "So you want me to dance with feathers, Herrol?" she demanded. "But I don't dance the way I used to, when you spied on me. I've learned a new way to dance with feathers." Slowly, provocatively, she unbuttoned her trousers and let them slide down. With a teasing smile she stepped free of them, kicked off her shoes, and threw her head back, catching sunlight on her face. Still partially concealed by a lacy curtain of wings, she rose to her toes and began to spin. Faster, faster she spun, first tucking her arms against her body, then letting them rise, borne up by the force of her motion. Within minutes her naked pink body had become a blur. As she spun, the birds that guarded Trebb, Nadd, and Herrol gradually withdrew to join the rainbow tapestry that rippled above her.

Her limbs shimmered, at first luminous with color, as if she had become a light source, then gradually taking first down, then plumage, until she was entirely covered with brilliant golden feathers. "Everything!" she shrieked, with the voice of a crybird. "Everyone looks at me and I get everything I want, Corrie!"

As I watched, every joint frozen, her spread arms became wings, and her breasts swelled into pectorals. She settled to her feet, spinning slowly now, peering at us with the tiny round eyes of a crybird. *"Everything!"* she screeched again, and her

lips pursed up into a shallow yellow beak. Her hands had disappeared entirely, and her feet had become claws.

The soaring bird I had seen twice in the distance—Feliss!

A trumpeting bellow sounded from across the yard. As we watched Feliss's transformation, Herrol had sunk to all fours. Now, his bull's torso swollen with muscle, he pawed the grass with incongruously delicate hooves. He tossed his head, a second belligerent declaration emerging from his muzzle. As I stared at him, spiraling horns grew from his skull. They were of purest ivory, gleaming in the morning sun, gleaming as white as his pelted hide gleamed black. He kicked at the grass and wagged his massive head, sweeping his horns against the air. With a final lusty snort, he pounded across the yard toward Feliss.

Woodenly I retreated, expecting Feliss's flying guard to launch itself at Herrol. But as he charged, I realized that the canopy of crybirds had disappeared, as if Feliss had feathered herself with them. Numbly I looked to Nadd and Trebb. Nadd huddled against the fence, blood streaming from his wounds, his entire body shrunken with fear. And Trebb stood rooted, his feet lost in the soil, his ankles grown with bark. His arms extended parallel to the ground, the blood that oozed from his wounds clear and sticky now, sap.

Had either of them given any more credence than I had to the village tales of a magnificent bull with spiral horns, seen mingling with the herd only by moonlight?

Certainly this was no creature of myth before us now. It was solid flesh.

Herrol's indignant bellow seemed to jar the very earth as he thundered from the yard, following Feliss's teasing flight across the meadow.

"No!" Nadd croaked, half-rising, staring after them with horror-struck eyes. "I promised Nira—"

"You promised you wouldn't let anyone turn into a bird today?" I cawed, my voice ragged with hysteria.

Slowly, woodenly, Trebb lowered his arms and disengaged his feet from the soil. He peered at us with blank green pupils. His voice, when it came, was little more than a rustle. "We can't let them—"

"We can't stop them," I cackled, the bird in his tree.

While we gaped at the scene in the meadow, massive bull and brilliant crybird charging and darting, Ronna stood. Her gaze was white-eyed, fainting, but her deliberate pace, foot before foot, took her as far as the gate before she sagged to the ground. She lay limp for moments, moaning almost inaudibly. Then she placed both palms

flat against the ground. Limp-wristed, she pressed her palms against the soil, trying to raise herself. "I know I can draw the strength," she whispered. "I feel it. I know. . . ."

I stared at her, frozen. Her voice was a harsh whisper, little more. Yet I sensed something in it I had heard there before, some bare promise of strength.

Trebb went to her stiffly, the blankness of his eyes terrible. "Don't try to walk, Ronna," he creaked. He slipped one arm around her and raised her, slack-jointed, from the ground. The effort seared the glaze from his eyes, substituted pain. "Corrie, help me get her to the steps."

Why did I hesitate, staring at them as they leaned against each other, Trebb wooden-limbed, Ronna so slack she seemed to have no bones? Trebb's pain touched me in the place where I still cherished images of a long-limbed infant, of a running boy, an earnest adolescent. And somehow there was strength in Ronna's voice, even in her fainting eyes, as if she were on the verge of tapping a hitherto undiscovered well of energy.

"I know I can find it," she whispered again, and I shuddered. If this were the moment when my Mother intended me to play my destructive strength against the others' weakness, before Ronna found her strength—

At first I didn't recognize the sound that froze the others, turning Nadd to a cowering child, making Trebb bare clenched teeth, driving the last blood from Ronna's ashen cheeks. It ululated across the overgrown play yard, an almost-tangible mourning wail, a thing apart.

Yet it came from my own throat. Recognizing its source, I pressed my hands to my throat, extinguishing the sound. Then, without speaking, I slipped one arm around Ronna and helped Trebb carry her back to the steps. Trebb wet another napkin from the hamper and stroked her face until she opened her eyes and peered emptily at us. After a moment her vacant gaze slipped beyond us to the meadow. Apprehension stirred deep beneath the dull surfaces of her eyes. Her dry lips moved, forming a single incomprehensible word of warning.

I turned. In the meadow Herrol stamped and snorted, his ivory hooves a dainty contrast to the massive bulk of his bull's body. Feliss darted teasingly at him, sunlight dancing on her gaudy plumage. When he charged, she swooped at him, then darted aside at the last moment, barely avoiding his ivory horns. She winged up against the clear sky, swimming the air currents, her wings spread. Staring up, I could hear her teasing laughter as she swept high

overhead, freed from the gravity that bound the rest of us.

But Herrol's bellowed protest quickly drew her back down. With a shrill cry, she dived at him again. He lowered his horns, bunching his massive shoulders, and galloped heavily through the grass, stung by her mocking assault. Screaming with delight, she returned again and again, raising his dark pelt with the rushing wind of her golden wings, slipping past his horns by bare centimeters.

"No!" When the protest rang through the air, I thought I had uttered it. But it was Nadd who jumped up and staggered down the overgrown path, his face twisted. "No!"

No sooner had his second cry lanced the air than Feliss made her final dive. Overconfident, she swept at the ivory horns and failed to pull away before the surging power of her own wings drove her into them. Instead of gliding up and away, she impaled herself upon the horns, driving them deep into her feathered abdomen. With a shrill cry, she threw her crested head back in agony.

Herrol halted mid-charge, his eyes rolling up. Before I could move, Trebb raced past me, restored to full mobility. He dashed through the meadow in a welter of agitated web-grass. "Herrol, pull in your horns!"

"Take back your shape!" Nadd screamed, hurtling after Trebb. "Your human shape!"

Instinctively Herrol tossed his head, trying to throw Feliss free of his horns. When that failed, he lowered his head and pawed the ground, as if to scrape her free. His eyes were wild. His bellow seemed to shake the very ground.

Trebb reached him and somehow found the strength to wrestle his head erect again. As he struggled, shouting in Herrol's ear, Feliss's spread wings closed in a sudden spasm. Her bright-feathered body shuddered and her plumage began to molt, each separate feather first dropping, floating lightly for a moment, then taking life of its own and fluttering away. Within moments a cloud of crybirds surrounded them, screaming with fright. Nadd beat at the confused birds, driving them back. His voice was as shrill as Feliss's.

But the frightened birds yielded to him, drawing back like a curtain to reveal Feliss lying naked in the grass, two gaping wounds in her abdomen. Herrol stood over her, hooves and horns gone, his face human again, transformed by brute fear. Feliss stared at him with the blankness of shock, one gray hand pressed to each bleeding wound.

"Was that everything, Feliss?" I ground out when I reached her. "Was that everything you wanted?"

Her eyes rolled toward me,

suddenly lost in weak tears. She tried to turn back my accusation, but shock had numbed her lips. All she could do was whimper, staring at me accusingly. Then she gazed past me, and her eyes widened.

I turned and stared back toward the cottage. Ronna stood erect at the center of the overgrown path, her head thrown back sharply, her arms raised straight overhead. She had cupped her palms, turning them toward the sun like receptors. She tossed her head, making her feathery hair billow on the breeze.

Then she brought her head slowly erect until she peered directly into the sun. Incredibly her normally dull eyes seemed to cradle the sun itself in their depths, growing, deepening, overflowing with light. When she had peered for minutes directly into the sun, she began widening and narrowing her eyes rhythmically, rocking her head back in a drawing motion each time they widened, then letting her head slip forward as she narrowed her eyes.

Feliss whimpered, but Ronna continued to rock her head forward and back, forward and back, widening and narrowing her light-struck eyes, until a concentrated beam of energy became visible, linking her to the sun itself. Slowly she let her head drop back, raising her light-flooded gaze until she stared up at her cupped hands. The connecting beam rose, as if directed, and focused upon the palms of her hands. She lidded her eyes and stood for minutes, light-energy making first her hands glow, then her wrists and arms. Finally she moved her hands apart, each describing a half-arc, spreading light with it.

And Ronna's emaciated body, I realized, was no longer skeletal, no longer fainting. Fed by the sun, her bony limbs had become full and smooth. The curves of her newly fleshed body pressed tautly against her coverall. The contours of her face rounded as I watched, the proportions of nose, jaw and forehead altering until she was almost unrecognizable. Half-lost within the nourishing cloud of solar energy, Ronna tossed hair that for the first time was thick and glossy. *"I can draw the strength," she had said, and now she drew it.*

With a strange smile, a smile full of knowingness, of mastery, of poise, of all the things Ronna had never possessed, Ronna raised her arms again, sweeping the enveloping orb into a compact ball of fire which she tossed back toward the sun. When it disappeared into the sun's surface, a halo of light lingered round her, faint, blue-white.

It took her forever to cross the short distance with her strange, gliding stride. When she reached us, the sun still glowing in her

eyes, I realized that she had grown taller by almost half a meter. The hem of her coverall barely reached her calves, and the sleeves of her bodice had split. She kicked away her shoes, the seams burst, and stood before us a goddess, smiling an unreadable smile, the sun-glow of her eyes enveloping us in a cloud of warmth. "Feliss, do you know how much energy it takes to heal the mortal wound of a sunwaif?" Her voice was a purring contralto.

Feliss squeezed her eyes shut, sending tears down her gray cheeks. "I didn't mean to hurt myself."

The golden eyes studied her unwinkingly. "Do you ever mean to hurt?"

"I don't hurt people," Feliss protested pettishly. "People want things from me—they always want things from me—and I give them what they want."

"But only after you've made them beg," Ronna reminded her without condemnation. "That's your way, isn't it? To tease, to flirt—"

"Well, people must like to be teased then! They always come back!"

"People like to be healed too, but I never make them beg," Ronna said gently. "I never ask them to surrender their dignity before I heal them."

Feliss's voice had grown noticeably stronger. Color stung her cheeks. "Well, you're doing it now, aren't you? To me!"

"And do you enjoy it? Do you like being teased?"

Feliss's features puckered indignantly. "You know I can't do what Herrol really wants. If I did, you'd tell Nira and she'd never let me out of the cottage again!" Her voice had risen to an injured squeal. "What does everyone expect me to do? Corrie keeps saying I'm a spoiled baby, but people don't follow her around and beg her to make the birds dance. Old men don't paw her every time she walks through the Crossroads. Children don't beg her to talk like a crybird and—"

"And you love it!" I grated. "If people didn't notice you, you'd turn somersaults at devotions just to get their attention. Just like you came to the picnic in clothes you knew Herrol would want to rip off you. If you didn't want him to bother you, why didn't you wear your old coverall and bodice?"

"Then he wouldn't have come at all," Feliss charged. She squirmed up from the grass, forgetting to cradle her wounds. "Do you think he'd come just to share lunch with you and Ronna? You don't even comb your hair and Ronna's so ugly she—" Abruptly she bit her lip and turned fearful eyes to Ronna.

Ronna was so ugly . . . I drew an unbelieving breath, staring at the gaunt girl who swayed weakly against Trebb, her glow-

ing eyes extinguished, her clothes hanging emptily on her emaciated frame. Her eyes rolled up and she gestured to the grass with one skeletal hand.

Feliss gasped, running her hands down her bare abdomen. All that remained of her wounds were two puckers. Her face was a study in conflicting emotions: relief, elation, mortification, pique. She stared as Trebb lowered Ronna to the grass, turning her to face the sun, her cupped hands at her sides.

Ronna's breath rattled in her windpipe. It was minutes before her eyes fluttered open. She smiled weakly. "I knew I could draw the energy. I've been so weak, so tired all month. But I've felt the tingling in my palms every day. And today, when the need came, I knew what to do. I knew how to draw the energy directly from the sun."

Trebb knelt beside her, smoothing a feather of dust-colored hair from her forehead. "Can you do it again? Can you make yourself like that again? Whenever you please?"

Briefly she closed her eyes. "I can do it," she said distantly. "I can do it, but it's too soon now. The change—"

"Does it hurt?" Feliss demanded, summoning something like concern.

Ronna smiled faintly. "It—burns. It burns me. Inside where no one can see."

"And I'm the only person you've ever done it for?" Feliss demanded with selfish wonder.

"You're the first. Later I'll do it again. But not now. . ."

"You shouldn't talk," Nadd decided, glancing round officiously. "Bring the chair from the play yard, Herrol, so we can carry her back."

Herrol had forgotten his fear of minutes before, had forgotten any debt he might owe Ronna. His shallow forehead creased rebelliously. He had never tolerated Nadd's officiousness. "I have calves to tend," he announced. Turning, he stamped away across the meadow.

Nadd called after him, but Trebb shook his head. "Corrie, help me carry her back to the Crossroads."

I edged away from his earnest gaze with a sensation close to panic. I only wanted to lose myself in the sheltering mustiness of my bluewillow tree, to forget everything I had seen this morning. "I'm not going back to the Crossroads," I declared, trying to make my voice as hard as Herrol's.

But Trebb could bend me when no one else could. "You have to, Corrie. Nadd's too short to hold up the other end of the pole. And I can't carry her by myself. It's too far."

Trapped, I peered from one to the other. Ronna lay like a bundle of sticks in the grass, dry, gray, angular. Feliss had covered herself with crybirds.

They perched upon her arms and shoulders and clung to her abdomen and back, mewling softly. Nadd's eyes still bulged with apprehension, and Trebb knelt at Ronna's side, the grass worshipping at his ankles.

Trebb . . . A torturing fist clutched my heart. My parents had had opportunity to destroy Feliss and they had faltered. And so Trebb had been spared too; I had been spared, Nadd and Herrol had been spared. Even Ronna had been spared.

Had I misunderstood my parents' urgency? Had I even misunderstood their ultimate intention?

I tried to fashion hope from the morning's events. But as I walked back to the play yard, I could feel my Mother quivering underfoot.

And as we carried Ronna back to the Crossroads between us later, Nadd and Feliss trailing behind, I knew that Trebb was as keenly alert as I to the mood of the soil underfoot. And I knew he shared my unease about our future as daughters and sons of this troubled Destiny. Still, he flashed me a smile of rare reassurance.

## EPILOGUE
*NADD*

When I began this manuscript, I was concerned about the solar storms I saw in our future, afraid of the births that would follow. Now I have learned that another kind of genesis is already imminent.

In a small cottage north of Wursterville a young woman awaits virgin birth. She insists she has known no man. Late one night, she says, she woke to find her cottage besieged by dappled green stalks. As they sprang from the soil, they thrummed and sang to her, wordless songs that held her spellbound. As the light of first one moon and then another fell across the celebrating stalks, they flowered and released a golden pollen that fell upon her, touching her in all the hidden places of her body. And now she is large with child, Trebb's child.

How many others carry the same seed, I have no way of knowing. Time will tell.

Time will tell much: whether settlers who were once devout pilgrims can accept the birth of dozens of children as strange as the six of us or stranger; whether any of us can tolerate the presence and proliferation of gifts that at first appear bizarre or destructive; whether the original sunwaifs can adapt to a new generation without conflict.

But perhaps one day a child will be born who has that fulfilling touch. Perhaps one day every settler on Destiny will be as he or she was intended to be.

Perhaps one day we will all be gods, at home on a world that is our greater god. ■

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